THE PHANTOM OF BLOOD

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/52644649.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Hannibal (TV), Le Fantôme de l'Opéra | Phantom of the Opera & Related Fandoms
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Alana Bloom, Jack Crawford, Freddie Lounds, Bedelia Du Maurier, Dr. Frederick Chilton, Beverly Katz, Margot Verger, Abigail Hobbs
Additional Tags:	Hannigram - Freeform, Alternate Universe - Fantasy, Dark Fantasy, Age Difference, Power Dynamics, Love Triangles, Murder, Murder Tableau (Hannibal), Religious Imagery & Symbolism, Cannibalism, Loss of Innocence, Dark Hannibal Lecter, Young Will Graham, Fantasizing, Possessive Hannibal Lecter, Hannibal Lecter is Obsessed with Will Graham, Will Graham is a Tease, Not-so-accidental exhibitionism and voyeurism, Invasion of Privacy, Fondling, Blood and Gore, Canon-Typical Violence, Mutual Pining, Beverly Katz Ships It, Jack Crawford Is So Done, Alternate Universe - Phantom of the Opera Fusion, Mild Sexual Content, Minor Character Death, Chilton suffers all of the misfortunes, Even the chandelier., Gothic Romance, Ballroom Dancing, Costume Parties & Masquerades, Alternate Universe
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2023-12-30 Updated: 2024-08-25 Words: 42,054 Chapters: 9/?

THE PHANTOM OF BLOOD

by reveriedusang

Summary

~~~~~~

Will Graham, a young performer for the Paris Opera House, finds himself under the grasp and tutelage of a dark and mysterious musical composer that hides within the Opera's depths. As horrifying things begin to occur all around him, Will is tested. All kinds of feelings arise in the heights of conflicts that are unimaginable to most, and through them, one question remains.
Will he finally embrace the darkness and with it become one, or will he bring it all to light?

~~~~~~

-A hannibalesque dark fantasy fic set in the world of the Phantom of the Opera.

Notes

Hi there! If you are reading this story, you probably have at least the slightest idea surrounding the subject of The Phantom of the Opera. If you don't, that's okay too!

You don't need to be knowledgeable of the novel and/or its adaptations (though it helps) to enjoy this work since I will be differing from the original plotline quite a lot! But don't worry, the concept will remain very much the same.

Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

In which the Phantom of the Opera watches over them all...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The streets of Paris were peaceful and quiet in the heights of the afternoon. All that could be heard from outside were the fleeting winds and the gentle passage of carriages over the gravelled grounds. Little beyond a rhythmic click of hooves over the faint murmurs of voices permeated the ninth arrondissement.

Few people were present in the areas surrounding the Palais Garnier. Merchants and passersby carried out their duties ordinarily, entirely unknowing of the dark eyes that peered at them from one of the balconies that the grandiose building possessed. Between monumental arches and hidden beyond columns of grey stone, a *ghost*.

The looming presence stood in the midst of oblivion. It was the image of likeness to a god's observation over helpless humanity, those eternally lost and unheard whilst pleading through the loss of blood and tears. A swift flash of black veiling, and the presence was suddenly gone. Quick to return to the depths of the Opera House in perfect silence with not so much as the slightest trace that it was ever there.

The theatre hall within the Palais, as opposed to the mysterious Opera Ghost, was nowhere near as silent.

The common hallways were bustling with activity. A chorus of lively voices echoed in feminine laughter and cheer as the girls from the corps de ballet ran through them to retrieve their positioning for their first act. Each one of them pranced around the stage in the theatre hall in practice and with due enthusiasm, sporting their costumes that had just recently been tailored for the occasion. Through their pirouettes and turns, the sequinned skirts and drapes they wore, though simple, looked particularly enchanting in movement as they flowed effortlessly through the air. Ethereal, just as what had been intended by design.

The background that surrounded the ballerinas was no less impressive. Beyond the cascading red curtains, images of rich mythological landscapes ranged in all kinds of colourful tones and vibrant greens across the backdrops. They were painted across wooden panels positioned in the far back of the stage to emulate the enchanted forests depicted in Botticelli's *Primavera*, the painting on which the current opera was based.

Though many had questioned the origin of such a striking subject choice during the previous months in preparation, Madame du Maurier, the elusive secretary who served as more of a

manager than the stage manager himself, insisted that the composer wished to remain unknown. The same principle applied to his motives and chosen fixations, as well.

Because of this, nobody but her knew anything about this mysterious benefactor beyond written communications and rumoured encounters amongst the youths. And without a doubt, *beyond the infamy he'd gained through the tales of his bringing of death...*

Evidently, the mystery of this supposed composer's identity inspired tales of the macabre amongst those more inclined to believe them. In their minds, he who remained so greatly unknown ought to have been a *devil* or a *ghost...*

Or rather *him*, the *Phantom of the Opera.*

Bedelia Du Maurier seemed adamant on maintaining her silence surrounding such a fear inducing subject. Particularly amongst the impressionable young girls she served as secretary to, given that they were rather predisposed to fear and distress at such notions. Many rumoured that Bedelia had vowed to keep her silence many years prior when strange disappearances and uncanny deaths had become prominent within the Palais Garnier. —A good thing then, that there had been murder no more. Not for a decade as far as Bedelia knew. She spoke not a word of his identity, still.

Once all of the ballerinas were gathered, the Maestro, Monsieur Price, gave his cue to begin with a steady wave of his hand. A melody carried seamlessly through each of the resounding instruments of the orchestra, signalling to all that the opening act had just commenced. The girls took their turns dragging their pointe shoes neatly across the box of rosin placed strategically out of view. They stepped out one by one beyond the red curtain to begin the performance of their first act: the dance of the forest nymphs in welcome of their deity, their lead, *Aphrodite*.

Who, of course, was *late*.

Freddie Lounds stormed onto the stage with a start. She gave the impression of a bull seeing red despite the divine intention of her character and the elaborate composition of the dress she wore; one of silvers and pearl whites. However serene and awe inspiring the ensemble was meant to be, one might fail to believe it watching her as she was now. —Or ever. Though she possessed confidence and presence above the stage no doubt, some might dare to suggest that she was far from ideal...

The music ceased with an abrupt pause upon her arrival. Freddie took angered steps towards the centre of the stage, a dread-inspiring frown over her features. As she paused to take a sharp breath everyone around her seemed to still and brace themselves for what was to come. Many winced at the sound once she raised her voice to a shout, stern and unpleasant.

"Where is my *bichon*?!" She looked between each of the surrounding dancers, many of which couldn't help but shy away from the directness of her stare.

"Uh... *Who*, Madame?" Frederick Chilton, the man *in charge* of the Opera Garnier, inquired. His question remained unanswered through the cutting silence that they were all forced to

endure. Freddie didn't seem to notice his inquiry. Very few people seemed to care to notice him often, despite his high status and his supposed role of stage manager.

Perhaps it was due to his attitude as it was now, visibly uncomfortable despite clear efforts to suggest otherwise and hardly convinced of his own capabilities, if at all. His insecurity was fair. After all, Chilton had no place in the arts.

There were only so many things one could successfully feign and competence was not one of them.

"She speaks of her dog, Monsieur." One of the choir girls who had understood Freddie's mention of the dog breed leaned towards him in a whisper, then quickly stood perfectly upright once more.

The disappearance of the dog was easily explained, if not suspected by the few that knew enough to expect it. It was a small Bichon Frisé that appeared to have gone missing, a kind of dog renowned for its white coiled fur akin to that of a poodle and its friendly and easygoing demeanour that often worked in its own detriment, if destined to an ill fate in the form of an unfit owner. Luckily, the bichon that the girls in the corps had affectionately named *'Bijou*' was currently being relieved of its torments caused at the hands of Freddie Lounds.

In the right wing of the palais, one of the many dormitories where the girls often spent their nights, though usually locked during the day, remained unlocked and occupied in spite of the persisting sunlight. Within it, the well-loved Bijou sat atop one of the beds and remained predictably safe and sound.

The dod keened, perfectly content and appreciative of the pets it received from dexterous hands that worked in spite of their affections to remove all the different bows, jewels, and other various ornaments that Freddie Lounds had inflicted upon the poor pup as though it were a small child —No, a *Doll*.

Once done, the boy to whom those very hands belonged ruffled the dog's fur both in praise and to return the sections that had been tied and braided together with pink lace to their natural place.

"There you go" He spoke softly, smiling with contentment as he absentmindedly ran a palm through his own hair; dark brown curls grown just past his jawline with a few loose strands that always seemed to fall over his eyes, no matter his attempts at pushing them away.

The comfortable peace he'd found was short-lived, for not even a moment later the bedroom door suddenly flew open, startling both the boy and the dog. Crystalline blue eyes, now wide and alert, looked up to see who it was.

Alana Bloom, the ballet instructor, stood in the doorway looking visibly distraught. Her breaths were heavy, complexion near flushed. —She had been running. Finding them there at last seemed to quell her worries somewhat.

"Will." Her tone of voice was both of relief and torment at once. "I've been searching for you everywhere"

It was at this point that Will felt a spark of anxiety in realising that he had completely forgotten about their final rehearsals. He had been so occupied with his current endeavours that the knowledge of it had completely slipped his mind. He looked up in silence, unbothered with trying to find and give justification. He felt like he was surrendering to consequence in a way, both dreading and expectant whilst he ran his fingers through Bijou's coiled fur coat. It blended almost perfectly with the warm whites of the bedding. Almost like a cloud, Will thought.

Alana sighed moments into the quiet, readjusting her skirt by the hem and fixing her long, dark hair. Will directed his attention back to her then, and though dishevelled from her sprint, she still looked lovely. She always did in a bright, comforting way. She often wore reds, today being no different, which paired well with the rouge that always appeared to stain her lips. Her eyes were of a fair blue that reminded of cold winters of ice and snow. The emotion that shone through them made them warm and bright, however. Beams of sunlight through the winter cold.

Their brightness seemed to dull in that moment, for the emotion that shone through them now was something close to sorrow.

"Let's go"

She gestured, giving Will a pitying look as he stood and cradled Bijou in his arms. By it, Will knew that something bad ought to have happened, and it related to him no doubt.

It proved more discomforting than it should have. Though perhaps he was being irrational, Will felt that through her eyes he was reduced to an image frozen in time. The way she'd looked to him now, to nothing but a mere vision of the young child he once had been.

Will could recall that it was ten years prior to the present that now made him nineteen, when he'd been vulnerable and without defense. He'd been left to fend for himself as an orphan following his father's untimely death. With no other family to care for him, Will was lucky to have been discovered and brought beyond the grand walls of the Opera Garnier. Lucky to have been given an education in the arts thereafter and up until now.

Alana Bloom was the first person to have made his acquaintance when he'd first come to know the Opera. Scared and confused for certain, *a broken child*. What a lasting, pitying impression he must have made,

but was that *all* that Alana saw in him now?

A lot had been left unsaid, just as few words were spoken between them during the walk back from the dormitories. They took the usual route, which led through obscure underground passages and past the grandiose main entrance that the palais often dazzled its visitors with. Will always looked forward to passing it each morning, it looked like something out of a fairytale.

The grand entrance was bright, with glimmering crystals from chandelier lamps and broad windows of tinted glass specked with gold. In its centre, a grand staircase based in white marble accented with gold along its rims. Rivers of gold that met the ground floor and

splayed out into a grand foyer of the same marble whites and streaks golden as a sky at dawn. *Stunning*, at first sight. But eventually that same extravagant staircase led to other darker, more modest paths.

They were walking through them right now, with Alana hoisting an oil lamp to brighten the way and Will carrying Bijou, who stirred lightly against the hold of his arms. Will looked around himself, ever-curious as though he was seeing the halls he'd walked through for years on the daily for the very first time.

It was then that one of the many rumours he'd heard from the other girls in the corps de ballet came to mind. Claims that the Opera house possessed many secret passages through which they could reach any point they wished. *Passages through which the Phantom Of The Opera spied over them all...*

Of course, Will didn't truly believe in these dark fantasies that the others allowed themselves to get swept up in so completely. Though impartial to their beliefs, he still examined each of the walls and pillars that he came across as they walked. Part of him hoped to find inconsistencies that would lead way to the secret passages that the girls so often raved about. Perhaps a sconce mounted on the wall, just irregular enough for recognition so that upon pulling it back with some force, the walls would pull apart and lead way to a hidden staircase. If not a torch sconce, then a heavy bust placed before a narrow doorway, hidden and unnoticed by the many passersby.

Will told himself that he wished to disprove the girls' childish fantasies by noting that there were no such things present. Somehow, he still felt disappointed when he found nothing but ordinary torchlights, pillars and busts. There were only spiderwebs and dust in place of what he was so eager to 'disprove'.

Will relented in his search and they walked for a while longer. Finally, they passed the lavish staircase that proved to be as dazzling a view as Will had remembered and entered the Theatre hall through one of the entrances on the ground floor. Usually he'd find his way there through the hallways in the backstage with the rest of the group, but this proved to be faster.

Therefore, it was as Will walked between the floor seats in the centre of the auditorium with Freddie Lounds' dog in his arms that he suddenly found himself in the middle of a feud that he didn't know he had been a part of. The commotion on the other side of the room came to a stop ever so suddenly upon his arrival with an echoed finality. Then, everyone seemed to turn his way.

Between many others, a pair of wide eyes set intensely over his own with unmatched disdain. The silence surrounding him was the loudest thing he'd ever heard, and it shattered like glass at the single word uttered.

"You."

Freddie Lounds spoke, pointed beyond simple accusation. He had been a target of hers long before, to his utter misfortune. The very sound of her voice resounded throughout the theatre hall like a gunshot, a devastating echo that lingered in its ancient walls. Will stared in silence, only it was at the tulle of her dress and not her eyes. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction of

holding her gaze, he refused to so much as appear to acknowledge her. Regardless, Will could see with great clarity how her mouth twitched into a hint of a smile. It was one that Will knew far too well. One of petty determination, a calculated wickedness to come.

...And so the act commenced.

Freddie suddenly burst into loud, incoherent shouts with all the grace of a spoiled, petulant child throwing a temper tantrum over the absence of her favourite toy. Of course the only act she could successfully put on had to be one of such *insolence*. All of this, for the sole purpose of spinning the narrative she saw fit for her goals.

Will could admit that she was resourceful in playing that part. Regardless, it didn't change the fact that no matter what they dressed her in, she didn't fit any of the roles that she had been given time and time again in the many productions she'd lead. No role that required true talent and grace, at least. She fit the role of a *clown* at best.

Will could recognise his own jealousy in his thoughts on that.

Through her whining Freddie managed to reach the stage manager, to whom she displayed her loud histrionics once more. She knew that with the power Frederick Chilton held, though undeserved and often wasted, he'd most likely appease her out of pure intimidation.

That and, *of course*, he was rather fond of the Prima Donna himself. It seemed that the stage manager had rather dire tastes indeed…

"He stole my dog, Monsieur!" She began, so obnoxious that Will felt he may well drown in the feeling. "The poor creature has been left so deprived of his adornments that I hardly recognise him anymore!"

That much was true, though Will could argue that they were torture devices as much as they were 'adornments'. He could too argue that she hardly knew its name and had no true reason for such theatrics, but she knew that and she knew it well.

Oh, how absurd it all was.

Chilton gave a nervous chuckle. "Surely it was nothing but a misunderstanding Madame, there is no need for such worry-"

"Oh, but you must do something Monsieur!" Freddie bawled. "I have been cursed with great misfortune every season that I have lead! And now… now I know that it was him all along!"

"I have done no such thing." Will countered, near apathetic as he had no hope of being believed. He quickly gathered that he wouldn't be, and that it wasn't worth saying anything at all.

"But I'm sure of it!" Freddie spoke over him. "He's a *lunatic*, Monsieur! A *psychopath*!"

Will felt a soft hand grasp his shoulder just as Freddie lounds' words reached new heights of accusation. Alana had rushed to his defense, surely concerned with how he was fairing

through all of this. The things Freddie had said were surely meant to wound like daggers, and they *might* have, if they were anywhere close to the truth.

"That's enough, Freddie. Let us be reasonable about this." Alana's grasp over Will increased ever so slightly through her words, level-headed and firm. She was protective of him no doubt. Rather than tending to the issue at hand, Will couldn't help but focus on the gentle touch of her palm now flat across his back. Vaguely, he worried how it might come across to those intent on watching them. The other girls…

"I agree with Madame Bloom." A voice cut in from across the auditorium. "You're acting quite the brat, Miss Lounds"

Freddie's head snapped back to glare at Monsieur Price, who soon quieted down and in turn avoided her gaze by looking at his understudy, Monsieur Zeller. They had a friendly rapport. A lot of rumours circulated about the pair in the Opera Garnier as well, though queer matters were not as scandalous in the world of theatre as they would have otherwise been in the outside world.

...On the other hand, romance was always a riveting subject amongst the girls in the corps, so they held an interest all the same. They'd often rush into the dormitories after practice with giggles and hushed remarks. Their spying on the pair would be victoriously announced with claims of having seen the two men *together*. Will listened like everyone else, but ultimately he didn't have such prying interests.

After all, he was tormented enough by rumours of his own. Volatile speculations regarding the nature of the relationship between Alana Bloom and himself...

His train of thought was interrupted by the ongoing argument, and *oh* the pressure had only increased. Freddie was ever-determined in her fight against him, which came as no surprise.

"He's trying to sabotage me!" She yelled as though in great tragedy. "It was no more than a week ago when one of the counterweights above the stage fell whilst I rehearsed my aria and barely missed my head!"

Will couldn't so much as give his denial before she spoke again in feigned distress. "And just a month before, a candelabra was tipped over my costume for the previous opera and set ablaze! This is no coincidence Monsieur… it was *him*!"

Chilton spoke cautiously, no doubt unnerved. "I understand your frustrations Madame, but I can't see why such casualties should be attributed to the boy… these things do happen."

"*These things do happen*." Freddie scoffed, incredulous, near hysterical, at such words. "These things do *happen*?! Such things have been happening for the past three years!"

Bijou struggled against Will's hold, anguished by the shouting voices. He adjusted his hold over the bichon and was grateful for the silence that followed her final remark. He tried to soothe the distressed creature as best as he could in such circumstances. Freddie had ceased for an instance, and the other girls spoke in hushed whispers amongst eachother to discuss all that they'd beheld.

Will could've almost sworn to have heard some of them mention the Opera ghost. He would have been a worthy culprit to explain the troubling occurrences that Will had no play in, if he was anything more than a myth to begin with…

"Very well then, I will make this an easy choice for you all" Freddie said, though this time not in a shout. Suddenly she was tranquil, a knowing traitor to her own performance as it so obviously slipped.

She smiled. This was no doubt the calm before the storm to come, and there was a sickly feeling in anticipation.

"You will make this freakish boy leave the Opera at once ...or this is the last you'll know of me and my performances in this establishment."

The room was silent, no one dared to speak. Her words had come as a shock to all that were present. For Will, it manifested as relief at the notion of being rid of her at last.

It quickly turned to dread once he realised that she wouldn't be the one leave at all. She was indispensable, the *Prima Donna*, and Will was nothing but another invisible asset to ballet and choir.

Surely, it'd have to be him.

Freddie quickly grew tired of the unrelenting silence, it seemed. "Very well then, I'll leave. Good luck finding a new lead this close to the date of the premiere!"

Freddie pushed past the other girls upon announcing her resignation. Almost immediately, Frederick Chilton was the one to chase after her. He practically tumbled across the stage, grasping her dress in a panic.

"There is no need for such extreme measures, mademoiselle Lounds!" Chilton pleaded, breathless. "Of course... we will do anything you wish... but first you could perhaps consider simply… asking the boy to apologise and return the dog?"

Freddie turned to look down at Will from where he remained stood before her. For an instance she seemed pensive, given to consideration. Her expression shifted to something dangerous. She became amused.

"Yes, you are quite right Monsieur" She agreed, and the decision seemed greatly out of place. Never in her right mind would she faithfully agree to something as simple and forgiving as this. Freddie, if nothing else, was out for *blood*.

Chilton smiled, relieved by the apparent resolution of such a demanding conflict. It was foolish of him to believe that of course. Freddie spoke once more and it only proved his naivety.

"Will Graham will need to resign all the same, of course. But I should like to receive an apology if he wishes to avoid *prosecution* for the horrid crimes he has tormented me with for so long"

Will exhaled a sharp breath. Almost a chuckle, bitter as it was. *Prosecution on the grounds of what? Her baseless words?* Unfortunately with her influence that was reason enough. Will had no reputable place in their hierarchy. He had no hope to win this fight.

Alana seemed to realise it too, for she seemed to suddenly hold him closer, tighter. Almost as if she was afraid that he'd disappear from her arms in the blink of an eye. Taken from all that he knew and left to fend for himself once more through the darker, more unforgiving facets of Paris.

He could sense expectancy from everyone who watched. Head hung low, Will put Bijou down on the ground. He was ever-gentle despite his own growing disdain, and his gaze stayed on the ground afterwards. Bijou trailed off but went nowhere near his rightful owner. Freddie didn't seem to truly notice or care.

Freddie smirked. "And what else?"

Her relish and enjoyment of the show she'd made of him poured over her words like rainfall. Will knew that this was a losing game, and he wasn't eager to bow down to salvage losses that had already been set in stone. It became clear to him then that he wouldn't reduce himself further than he had been with an undeserved *apology*. He would endure and resign in silence, with grace.

For the first time, Will raised his head and met her eyes directly. Silent moments of defiance to what he believed to be a lost cause… and Will found in himself a seething resentment that wished her true *harm* like nothing else he'd ever felt or wished upon another.

The blue hues of his irises flickered under the stage lights and almost seemed to darken in spite of them. His features were soft and pure like those of a Botticelli Angel, but what hid beneath them was vast in contrast. His expression was perfectly inscrutable, so much so that no one could possibly see past it and it turn it became *unsettling*. It was unnatural for someone who looked like Will to appear unsettling. It was striking for something so bright and ethereal to possess such *darkness*… It only heightened his allure.

He stood, pure and heavenly yet dark and perplexing and *stunning* all the same. Stunning like a blood-red rose, so intricate that one might fail to notice the thorns that adorn its side. Blinded by its beauty, they'd be tempted to grasp and *take*... and the moment they take, they'd *bleed*. Poisonous deceit would rush through torn veins and blood would pour and stain only to leave the rose seemingly untouched by it, for it is just as red as the blood. It is just delicate enough to seem blameless.

Nobody could see past it. No one cared to understand. Will Graham had never once been *seen* before.

The dark presence that lurked within the shadows ***saw***.

Chapter End Notes

I hope it isn't too evident that this first chapter was initially meant as a silly little skit before I decided that it was deserving of something more.

Of course all of this had to start with Will's love of dogs. —anyway, I hope you'll stick around with me through this journey as there is a lot of drama (and bloodshed...) to come ;)

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

In which Will’s resolve is unyielding, but the future remains unwritten and left to be tainted with blood....

Lively voices echoed familiarly through the dark corridors that lead to the Opera's chambers, a disruption of the peaceful silence that Will could only assume to be the girls' return from their rehearsals in the theatre hall.

He turned over in his bed to face the door and watched as the ballerinas rushed past, their skirts flowing and their laughter fading into the other rooms. For a moment Will lingered on how he'd miss their laughter once he left. He felt hopeless, consumed by the feeling and rightfully so. He was restless in waiting for, well, anything. He'd spent the entire day alone just waiting for an outcome.

He couldn't allow himself any sort of defined expectation when his fate was so largely unknown. *Would he truly have to leave? Would he be subjected to the unknown and forced to build a new life for himself?* Will didn't know.

Abigail Hobbs walked through the door then, a lucky distraction. Will's thoughts and worries may well have driven him to insanity before he could so much as face what worried him so. She was wearing drapes reminiscent of divine mythology. They had resumed the rehearsals of the previous day without him, of course. Curious eyes, pretty and doe-like, trailed over him. Her concern was immediate, and *how could it not be?* Everyone had been there to witness what Freddie had turned into a memorable feud, and Will had been absent today. He was fearful of what Freddie would do if she knew he wasn't yet gone.

Alana had told Will that she was going to discuss the matter with Chilton now that the situation had calmed down considerably. Negotiate the outcome, in better terms. Will figured that so long as he isolated himself for the time being there'd be no reason for any more conflicts. Abigail had known nothing of him since the early morning therefore. He remained now just as he did then, waiting. Bracing himself for the inevitable impact Will irrationally awaited the nature of violence, loss of blood.

"Are you okay?" Abigail asked, the softness of her voice an ode to her gentility. She was precautious faced with the subject. Abigail took her place next to Will on his bed and he let her without reproach. He was distrusting towards most people, but Will and Abigail had known each other since they were children. He considered her family despite having no relation by blood.

"All things considered? I don't think so" he smiled, or rather tried. He was tired and subdued from his earlier frustrations. The whirlwind of emotions that had consumed him faded at last, and in place of ire and righteousness he felt nothing but a dull sense of melancholy. That, and regret. He tried to find humour in it, somehow. To convince himself that this wasn't as dire as he knew it might turn out to be. He was all too lost in contemplation to be able to make a convincing attempt of it.

He propped his head up on his elbow and looked up at Abigail through half-lidded eyes. "How were the rehearsals?"

"Not good, I missed you."

Will smiled, though sadly. He looked down at the blankets beneath himself whilst straightening the creases that they formed with his fingers. "You'll miss me often then, since I'll soon be forced to leave"

Abigail sighed. A gentle worry came over her, but she didn't seem to fully believe it just yet. "I'm sure Freddie didn't mean what she said yesterday" she reasoned. "Or in the very least I doubt those above her will allow it."

"You do?" Will chuckled, incredulous.

"She and Chilton remained in the auditorium after tonight's rehearsals" Abigail said, "To discuss this, I'm sure."

"Surely you do realise that I will be forced to leave for good" He said with no clear emotion. He spoke of it calmly, as though he'd come to terms with this as fact.

"—That, or I'll need to hide and reduce myself to the shadows so that Freddie doesn't see me and cast me away herself" he added, and what an alternative that was.

"I'll be like that ghost you girls so often talk about." He said jokingly. "Perhaps I'll need to join him in his whereabouts, if he'll have me."

Abigail smiled. As amusing of a thought as it was she still seemed to harbor concern. "You mustn't lose faith. They couldn't make you leave this close to the premiere. They won't, I'm sure of it."

Will paused for an instance to gather his breath and near sighed. "I have no relevant role in the performance, they'll have no problem replacing me." He countered, and it was the truth. Will wasn't needed.

Abigail went to speak again, but Will interrupted her. He gave the same argument that he'd tortured himself with time and time again, like a vice. Something that he hoped pointless affirmation would let him surpass so that it wouldn't wound him as it did with envy and false reverence. The affirmation, again, that he had no true purpose. Nothing but a stray voice in a choir of many. An absent figure of many more in ballet. He was, truly, insignificant. Freddie Lounds was the first lady of the stage. The Prima Donna, the star of every show he'd hoped to lead and only could in thought and fantasy.

He appreciated Abigail's unwavering spirit, her hopes and her denials of his dark reflections that only served him to drown. — But he didn't wish to hear of it. He only wished to be left to wallow in opaque oceans of darkness, negativity, and prepare for the reality of what was soon to come. *But would bracing himself for it make it hurt any less?* Will was just as unsure of that as he was of where he might find himself the following morning. In the following days, then years, and finally a lifetime.

Alana had tried to give him hopes as well. In a chase through the darkness that he'd cast himself away to, laced with urgency and desperation and a lack of clarity which proved that she was just as unsure as Will was. But she told him that she'd fix it, regardless. She'd promised, even though she would likely relent to disbelief just as he had.

Abigail soon relented as well against her previous hopes. Will watched her scan the room before them, noting that he'd stowed away his few belongings. He'd prepared to leave as soon as he gets word that he must. She didn't say anything of it. She didn't reassure him, *thank god*. Instead a silent acceptance came over them both; not tense, but heavy nonetheless.

Abigail smiled absentmindedly in the midst of it. "I never understood why Freddie was chosen as the lead. She doesn't sing very well at all"

Will chuckled in response, a little bit brighter. "she really doesn't" he agreed. There was silence once more, only lighter.

...it didn't last.

"I would've thought that Alana would be here with you right now. She has always been very protective of you"

Will stiffened. He hummed in response, which wasn't truly an answer of any sort.

"Oh, come now. We all saw her rush after you when you left the whole ordeal to fate."

"—I worried that you'd intended to leave the Opera of your own accord before they could force it upon you" Abigail added. Truly, she knew him well. "Of course, knowing that Alana had followed you certainly provided me with some assurance…"

Will noted her insinuations, as subtle as they were. He knew her well too. Will glanced up from the blanket beneath him, looking distinctively bothered despite having appeared that way long before. "I'm guessing this means that the rumours about her and I have returned."

"Yes. Is it the rumours, what is discomforting you?"

"No."

There was a pause. Silence only inspired the thoughts that plagued him, and Will spoke against it. He spoke hurriedly, a compulsion fueled by the urgency of wanting dismiss his feelings in some way.

In doing so he happened to voice the very thoughts that inspired those feelings.

"She tried to comfort me and I denied her of it. I pushed her away."

The words left his mouth both against his will and in hopes that the thoughts would leave him in favour of the winds that carried them. He didn't wish to think of it, but he needed to get it off his chest only to not remain how he was.

Of course, Abigail questioned him about it. And truth be told Will didn't know of his motives, nor why it was the very occurrence that bothered him the most despite the many other things that had happened and proved to be far more dire.

Will couldn't think of a single good reason for why he'd distanced himself from Alana in the manner that he had, but he'd done it regardless. Regardless of rationale and regardless of the very fact that he knew he'd be going against everything he felt in that moment, only to torture himself for it furthermore. He'd left her regardless of the comfort he needed then more than ever before, knowing of her willingness to provide it. Her willingness to care for him as she always had.

…Willingness, by choice, to *love him like her own,* as she always had.

Oh, how *infuriating* that was.

The feeling burnt through him, and Will didn't know why, which only made the hurt all the worse. He admired Alana for everything she'd ever done, owed her so much for it and *still*... He couldn't shake the feeling. He couldn't move past whatever it was that weighed down on him whenever she came close. That which overwhelmed him with a deep sense of guilt each time she cared for him without a second thought...

As though inevitable, Will remembered how Alana had chased after him the previous night upon recognising his upset. His unwise determinations, His hopes to be forgotten so that he could forget all about this life in turn. He remembered how she had grasped him by the arms then, whilst he rushed through those dark, dark halls. How she'd held him close like she often did. Nimble, comforting hands over his shoulders. Fingertips that gave gentle brush strokes over his skin, only wishing to calm him. Harmless touch, and yet it only gave Will something more to only desperately hope to forget.

He tried so very hard to forget, but Will remembered, *maddeningly so*, how he had felt a little bit *too much* in the midst of his upset, and had torn himself away from her arms only to rush through those dark, dark halls once more.

Will took a sharp breath as he laid uselessly over his bed. Overwhelmed by the thoughts that clouded his mind, he rolled over and buried his face in his pillow, sighing over it as well. He thought he may well have been burning up at that point. He felt the all-too-familiar heat of blood rushing to his face. He cursed at himself for it, feeling feverish though he knew that a mere fever wasn't truly the cause.

For that, he cursed even more.

"You don't wish to talk about this?" Abigail's voice suggested behind him, no doubt questioning such embarrassment to some varying degree. Will felt tempted to wait until the

torchlights in the outside halls were dimmed so that all conversations would be forced to die down in favour of sleep.

Eventually, Will forced himself to turn back around and felt much too aware of himself. He was still flushed in the face, hair a ruffled mess of curls now especially unruly. Despite being mid-winter, Will only felt increasingly hot in contrast with the chilling air.

He was sweating, which made it that much worse.

"I don't *not* wish to discuss it" He decided whilst he spoke. If he was going to drive himself insane by his own thoughts, it may as well be with an audience.

"Very well then, go discuss it with Alana" was the answer he received in turn.

Will grimaced at the thought, realising this was a subtle obligation on Abigail's part. He regretted not specifying who he'd wished to speak with exactly, though the outcome would have probably been the same regardless. Abigail was gentle and gracious, and as sly as she could be, she truly was a force.

She eyed him curiously, and judging solely by the look she'd given him, Will could tell that she was thinking it as well — he was a mess.

"Well, are you going?" She persisted.

"I have nothing of importance to say."

"Surely you do, if it has got you like this"

Abigail eyed him up and down in emphasis. Will stood up then, trying to overlook the acknowledgement. He straightened the sleeves on his top which hung loosely over his chest and arms, fixing his hair as best as he could in the mirror that stood opposite his bed. He placed a palm over his forehead momentarily to check his temperature. "I'm going to go get some air" he spoke.

"Yes, you are" Abigail affirmed with a flair of mischief. "And then, you're going to secretly go to visit Alana and resolve whatever it is that has you so worked up."

"—You have to say goodbye to her regardless" she reasoned. "Better to take precaution in case they *do* make you leave for good after all"

"Yeah, you're right!" Will replied with sarcastic enthusiasm. "I'll go find Alana, and hopefully the Phantom Of The Opera will take me right before I get the chance so that I'm never to be seen again."

Abigail smiled, half in ridicule. "So the legend goes..."

Will grabbed the oil lamp hung by the entrance door and stepped out into the dark corridor. "Let's hope it's true, so that I may be put out of my misery at last"

"Will" Abigail called out to him just as he was about to leave, though this time her tone was one of warning. "I don't wish to dizzy you with implications... But if they're really going to make you leave, this may be your last chance to say all that is weighing over your heart."

Will huffed in annoyance. "I don't-"

"You have nothing to lose, Will"

With that, Will soon realised that he wouldn't get anywhere with his convictions, and he sighed. He looked back a final time and nodded as though in agreement before stepping out into the darkness of the night and giving himself to a labyrinth of estranged and obscured halls...

Of course, he wasn't actually going to go see Alana. He may as well have been digging up his own grave. Instead he wandered the halls aimlessly, lost in thought like he so often was. He looked around himself, lifting the lamp towards the walls that surrounded him to once more search for hints of the Opera ghost's hidden paths. He found nothing but spiderwebs and dust, once more. Nothing but silence and the fading of torchlights accompanied him in his voyage. Only the sound of his own echoed footsteps trailed behind him, as far as Will knew.

He eventually decided on a new goal when he realised that the route he'd taken led to the main entrance that he'd walked past a day earlier. The one he'd recalled in perfect detail, despite having only been able to see it clearly at a distance, never more.

The reason for this, that people like himself were only allowed to use the staircases placed on the sidelines of the entrance hall. Ones meant for the poorest of nobles during performances and otherwise. They certainly held a distinction for it, for the luxury of the grand escalier was a distant sight, limited to the view of those most fortunate. Will had always walked through what were almost hidden staircases, plain and grey and estranged from the rest of the entrance hall as though in shame. Deprived, like he so often had been.

Clearly, Will didn't hold the privileges of those of royal blood and great wealth to be able to walk above the grand staircase he so often recalled. His circumstances wouldn't allow him to stand amongst those who did; pristine white marble and flickers of bright gold beneath the soles of his feet.

—*But Will did it regardless*, when no one was there to watch. When he was protected by the darkness of the night, through which nobody else dared to pass. Unlike most, fears of the Opera ghost did not hold him back. This was his indulgence, a secret only known to him and the supposed Phantom of the Opera.

Will set the oil lamp aside and took careful steps towards the foot of the staircase within the spacious main hall of bright golds and marble whites. Moonlight flowed seamlessly into the room through the large glass panel on the ceiling above Will and gave all that surrounded him an almost bluish hue. It was a complete contrast to the golden tones that the palais usually possessed. The ambience was, during these particular hours, dreamlike. Frescoes reminiscent of the ancient gods adorned the ceilings, high above him whilst they danced, weightless, above their landscape. The panel in their centre was like a passage towards the heavenly

gates to which they each belonged and held a place to. This was no place for divine light now, however. With no place for the sun, the moon was to be their only deity until dawn.

Only to be worshipped in secrecy, veiled by nightlight, oceans of stars…

It was calming, in a way, to see it all under a different light. The Opera was no longer loud and brimming with all kinds of diverse personalities — each of them longing to be seen. No, what to Will usually felt suffocating and much too bright dissipated and only a silent darkness remained.

Will took in the view as he passed, head raised to meet the heading of the staircase and the balconies that stood thereafter between large pillars and sharp arches carved from stone.

He set foot in the centre of the staircase; pristine white steps now a bluish hue. To each side of him, statues bathed in gold held up large lamps and were almost haunting in their stance and shadowy glow.

He began to take one step after the next, carefully taking in all that he passed and becoming breathless at the sheer beauty of it all. He reached the rim of one of the sides and traced it; the cool surface of marble stone cold against his fingertips.

He closed his eyes, then. Slowly, they fell closed and the complete darkness behind them quickly bloomed into a rich vision of the palais in daylight. His imagination had always been a gift that he dared-not share with many, for they'd think he was insane.

And so, through his eyes that no longer watched but saw just the same, those very arches set in stone were touched by sunlight, and the cool marbles he'd just felt were now a warm ivory with the usual hints of gold that he'd only seen from afar. It was perfect in every detail held within Will's mind, only this time the suffocating personalities ceased to speak in a desperate attempt to make themselves known. They were silenced, and they watched. All eyes were on Will, this was his audience.

This was his design.

He turned and slowly walked up the left wing of the staircase, ever-elegant in his stance as he basked in the the attentions that he'd never before felt. An appreciation that was foreign to him, though perhaps this was more similar to a fear-induced respect.

Soon he reached one of the balconies on the first floor and he traced its carvings with his fingers just the same. It was in the centre, towards the left side of the room, and was well-known by everyone that passed as the balcony with the best view of them all. Prestigious. But so was the one directly in front of him, equal in its view.

Someone stood there.

But this was no equal. This was *swine*.

Freddie Lounds stood directly before him. She looked uncanny, and she was forcefully silent just as everyone else. Not even in his dreams, could Will have imagined that she would go

silent...

Strangely enough, Will felt as though he had no control over his visions anymore. Unease crept below his skin like poison and the lights dimmed, reduced to darkness, nightlight,once more. He found no comfort in it this time. The air was sharp as daggers and it was cold… so cold.

Freddie looked distressed and her eyes seemed to grow wider as she watched him from across the room. Will began to wonder if this was all in his mind or a reality that he was living. Never had he felt such loss of control…

Despite having faded to the precedent nightlight, the glow of sunlight remained solely over Freddie like a spotlight. Soon, it shifted to a cold and unforgiving light, ever-luminous, as though in judgement cruel and divine. Her skin was as pale as the surrounding busts of white marble and it glowed under the spotlights. Her complexion grew colder. Her skin was like ice. He wondered if that's what he had touched after all, if not the cool marbled rims…

Her eyes grew even wider. They were unnaturally wide and they stared through Will and demanded of him. Forcefully, they dragged him forth and forced him to feel what she felt through the curse he'd been dealt with, and his dread only increased.

His throat tightened. He couldn't breathe.

He tried to look anywhere else, but he was frozen in place and her eyes, that no longer looked like eyes as they rolled back into her skull, were somehow still fixed over his own.

He couldn't breathe. He choked trying.

Behind her, a kind of darkness grew. A distinct flash of black veiling flashed before his eyes, and that same darkness grew and spread until it blinded Will and left nothing else beyond it. It consumed Freddie Lounds, pouring over her like blood, only darker.

Will was glad for not having to look into her eyes any longer. He was grateful for the darkness. He let it *in.*

Suddenly, he could breathe. He was no longer distressed, but what he felt next was almost more chilling in comparison. He felt vengeful. A passionate thirst for blood surged through him… and it was for a *reason*, as far as he could tell.

The palais returned before his eyes, still enclosed by moonlight, only darker… much darker. His eyes burned red.

He was watching through the eyes of a killer.

Will looked before himself again, and he saw Freddie once more. She was ordinary, but she paled once she met his dark, dark eyes. She ran, and he felt his own feet run miles before him in her direction before he could process the fact. He wasn't himself. He held no control, merely watching, feeling…

Why did this intrigue him so?

Will was agile in ways he hadn't been previously and, sprinting between stone busts and pillars, he soon came close behind her as they ran a full circle around the balconies they passed.

Freddie took a turn down the right wing of the staircase and Will found himself doing the same. He watched her run, helpless through the eyes of death, and he *felt*. He was consumed by a darkness that wasn't his own and it was exhilarating. He felt powerful, predatory, and worst of all…

...He liked the feeling.

The moment he grasped her everything turned to darkness once more. He opened his eyes before he could even think to look and realised that he had slipped. He found himself looking at the ceiling, lying flat on his back. He was frightfully and truly disoriented, and the divine frescoes that watched over Will provided no true guidance.

He squinted. Perhaps it was the lack of light, or the flailing shadows of the statues and sculptures at both his sides, but Will could have sworn that he saw the flash of a dark silhouette within the balconies on the highest level go past…

Only then, did he take notice of the aching pain he felt from having slipped over one of the steps, sharp and increasing. There was a strange wet warmth below his back and palms. He stood up, increasingly dizzy as he did so, and looked down at himself.

He felt sick to his stomach once he realised the source.

Freddie Lounds lay collapsed next to him, dead centre of the stairs. Her eyes were wide, so wide... And they were pleading as they stared right through him, stunned with pain. She writhed, choking, a dreadful sound. She was as pale as he'd remembered, and he shuddered at the thought that it was what he'd recalled having felt, too.

What disturbed him the most, however, was the gash drawn horizontally across her neck with perfect precision. The blood that dyed the pristine white marbles red as it drained from her throat and poured and spread over the staircase like the wings of an angel of death…

The blood looked black in the moonlight. It now stained his hands, and looking down at them, Will felt as though entranced with realisation.

The Phantom of the Opera had struck for the first time in over a decade...

And the Phantom of the Opera was there... inside his mind.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

In which Will is drawn into the night's embrace, where the melodies of life and death beckon him towards a twist in fate, and danger and desire entwine...

Will would have believed it to be normal for anyone else to feel frightened whilst watching someone drown in their own spilt blood.

What he himself found to be more frightening, however, was to be exposed to such a sight and realise that he didn't feel anything at all.

Will didn't feel for her at least. He watched, stunned and motionless, as Freddie Lounds writhed and choked on the blood that drained from her, and no matter how far he searched he couldn't find it in himself to care.

It was a strange feeling. He was hazy from his visions of that same night and dizzy from the fall and he wondered, stupidly so, if he was still lost within the confines of his cursed imagination. If perhaps this was all just a particularly morbid dream and nothing more.

He couldn't have been dreaming. His eyes were not closed.

Regardless, Will still didn't feel entirely like himself. He was stuck in a foreign mindset that he hadn't yet left and was rather *reluctant* to. Parts of him yet unknown urged to chase after the the feeling of power and prowess he'd felt before. As sudden of a discovery as it was, Will was perplexed by the suffering before him. Something about the way Freddie looked up at him, not down. How she'd so quickly fallen from her throne of superiority in favour of the *grand escalier* to which she'd collapsed and now bled. Will relished the sight of it. Her eyes were wide, pain blinding any chance at cogent thought and clear sight. Her senses were overcome with nothing but *pain,* at such a degree that it was something consuming and so very vast.

—And *Will* was in control of it now. He'd come closer, slowly, his head craned. He was gazing so completely into her eyes. An act so intimate, dominance. Will was *in control* now. He observed in a newfound effort to find through her eyes the extent of her suffering. To grasp the extent of her pain and take it around the edges, only to hold it to her as a weapon of his own thought. To feel it, the weight and power of it, in his own two hands. Her blood stained them as it did his back, his clothes, his mind.

She'd been given wings from rivers. The blood that still drained from her, steady currents of deep red and heavy spurts forced by the turbulence of her failing lungs. The dreadful sounds

she made in trying to breathe, low gurgles, grating wet gasps. Will found enjoyment in them somehow. It was more than he'd ever derived from listening to her singing voice.

Her eyes were tearful. They glimmered under the moonlight as did the gash across her throat. It was a precise incision, not a ragged edge in sight as it stretched from one point to the next across a perfect centre. Surgical, almost. As much as Will admired how swift and clean it was, he wished to butcher it. Ruin her, ruin himself and all that he once had been. He flexed his fingers, curious as to how it'd feel to dig and tear through her skin where it had been cut. To reach the base of her spine and wrap his hands taut around it. The feeling of the smooth curve of bones there, vertebrae. The sickening touch of flesh pulling apart. Lingering heat, faltering hints of a pulse. The intimacy of the kill. Blood and breath, there only to fuel Will's radiance…

Lost to these thoughts is how Will remained for a long instance of many. It was just as long as it had taken Will to realise that he wasn't seeing through the eyes of a killer anymore… that the eyes he possessed were his own.

That frightened Will like nothing else. For he wondered *how*. *How could the darkness he embodied be his own?*

He wondered how he could have, up until that very moment, allowed himself to be so cruel in watching Freddie splutter and gasp and plead through tearful eyes. How he could have seen her desperate search for mercy through breaths that held a threatening finality, and returned her gaze with a cold one. Purposeful in seeing her suffering and doing nothing to stop it. Making his spectacle of it known.

He thought of how he'd watched, through her eyes, as she began to lose her fight against death and *revelled* in it. Enjoyed the very sight. How he'd glared at her, cruel and emotionless, as though the battle she was fighting was against he himself. As though it was *him* causing her death.

For a moment, *he'd wished it had been.*

For each moment after that, he knew he was *damned*.

Shivers ran down his spine like lightning bolts at the thought of it, and now, despite his previous indifference, anxiety tightened harshly around Will's throat in revelation of this new perpetual side of him like a noose of his own thought. Knowing his luck, he knew he may well wind up envisioning it to great lengths. He could already feel his words begin to form the tightening knot of a cord around his neck. This may well have been the death of him.

But what if he was to be the death of her? What if he had done this? His cursed mind betrayed him. He had no way to knowing what he'd seen or done, Imagined or caused. *Was the murderer this supposed ghost or rather him?*

And if he had been the one to do this, *what would be made of him now?*

What future would he have, if it was that of a murderer? If it was so, he didn't want it. He wouldn't survive the accusation of it… Nobody but him could ever know.

So what must he do now?

Will closed his eyes as tightly as he could and sighed shakily in an attempt to calm his mind. His heart was racing wildly at this point, and his pulse rang heavily in his ears. He'd clenched his fists at some point as well, digging his nails into the skin of his palms. It hurt, but if he had caused himself to bleed he wouldn't have been able to tell anyway. With blood, his hands were already stained.

He took a suckling breath and opened his eyes again with the slightest glimmer of hope for, *what? For none of this to have been real?* Foolish it was. Will was only met with the same grisly sight. Culpability, hands that remained dyed red with blood. A wave of frustration surged through him, and he wondered why he'd even tried. Useless it was, to deny, pray, hope.

Then again, all he could really do was hope.

No more than a few minutes could have gone by since he'd first stood up and discovered her, but his cursed mind prolonged the moment as though it were a punishment exerted in the deepest pits of hell. All with a twisted god at his side, watching over his predicament in silent judgement. An angel of death observing, *delighted*, through the loss of blood and tears.

Will found himself pleading to this ignorant god. He begged for him to let this all be a dream. To take his pain away. Predictably, he got nothing in return and wondered why he'd even tried. He felt like he was crossing the bridge towards insanity, and rightfully so. He closed his eyes again. Hot tears shed and glided across his cheeks and he blocked out every sensation and thought along with them. He focused all of his attention on finding a voice of reason within himself.

...He heard another voice instead.

A dark baritone called out to him, and his song was haunting as much as it was *beautiful*. The voice was so captivating that Will could have been taken by it and forgotten all else. He would have been lost to its very sound, if it wasn't imposing as well. It was deliberate. It grounded Will and made him listen to its words.

And oh, those words were a *horror*.

The voice spoke of violence. Of beauty, as if both were alike. It surrounded Will with all the grace of an angel and enchanted him with all that was divine. But being as imposing as it was in nature, it also tightened its grasp around him as though it felt it had the right to *possess*. And Will's throat tightened further, only this time it was not a noose he envisioned, but a hand wrapped around his neck.

The voice demanded of him, though phrased as suggestion. It tempted and enticed as though it was that of Lucifer himself, urging him to take the first and final bite. The voice was merciless and yet it spoke of mercy. It told him to tear what remained of Freddie Lounds' life away from her. To hurt her further, and put an end to her suffering at last.

…But it would make of Will a *murderer*, doing so. *Was it selfish to deprive her of his mercy in favour of his own conscience?*

And, truly, did it matter? For her there was no hope now.

Will suddenly heard as his own voice began to sing with that of the phantom. *was this in truth nothing but a dream?* Together they formed a perfect harmony of baritone and tenor, a perfect combination of dark and light. He couldn't help but wonder if all of this was taking place in his mind after all, for this new voice was too perfect to be his own. Will recognised the words as his, but the sound was heightened by this presence that appeared so dreadfully dark yet secretly dreamt of beauty. Beauty, it seemed to have found...

Though harmonious, their voices differed in their words. The voice Will recognised as his own spoke of riddance. A comfort that Will had indulged in too often, so his instinct was to *avoid, avoid, avoid…*

But it was selfish, to remove himself from this situation and leave her to die…

Was there truly no hope for her now?

This new voice of his own wished to leave her. To leave her death to fate, let it take its slow and natural course. It wished to flee and leave Will's hands clean of their stains, so nobody but him would ever know.

This voice of his own wished to leave her, to limit the course of his fright. The other voice spoke of darkness...

Will thought he heard the music of the night.

~

Will held his palms over his face in frustration, shaking his head as he fell to his knees. They clashed painfully against the steps, but Will was uncaring of the jolting pain the sharp edges caused. He was almost glad for it. He felt as though it was what he deserved.

His decision involved neither one of the voices that reigned over his mind, for they both reached the same deathly conclusion. With a wince, he instead reached over Freddie's paling body and pressed both palms over her neck in an attempt to still the currents of blood that escaped from it.

He felt the heat of blood against his palms just as he had when he had fallen and recoiled at the sensation. He felt the urge to run away from it all once more. Still, he held his ground. He was determined to try to help. Not for her, *never for her.* It would ruin him if she died by his hand. He did this for himself.

Will was unsure of how long he'd spent calling for help before somebody appeared. His voice was weak and shaken from distress but it didn't deter him from trying. He'd shouted time and time again in hopes that somebody would hear him, all whilst seeing to it that Freddie didn't continue to bleed.

His shouts echoed through the hall and managed to reach the corridors in close proximity, where Bedelia du Maurier happened to be guarding the halls that she passed. Will saw a light cast in the shadows, and he snapped his head back in search of the source only to find her standing at a short distance away from the foot of the staircase. She was frozen in place with silent apprehension and shock, and it showed clearly on her face. Her wide eyes met his own with a clear question, '*did you do this?'* and Will did nothing but stare back in silence whilst remaining ever-aware of the pressure he had to exert over Freddie's neck. His thoughts were, in a word, erratic. He couldn't let this ruin his life.

It seemed that Freddie was determined to do so, even in near-death.

Bedelia stared for a while. Other than that, she appeared relatively calm given their circumstances. She seemed to analyse the situation with an uncanny lack of nerves. Will felt a sense of dread weigh over him at the thought that if she wished to, she could just leave him there. With each moment that passed his anxiety only increased to the point that pleads left his mouth without even thinking it. His voice broke more than it already had, and he sounded more vulnerable than he could have ever imagined he'd be.

Vulnerable as he once was, a broken child.

"Help me, *please*" he felt the urge to sob. This seemed to draw some sympathy from Bedelia. She approached the foot of the staircase and took the steps necessary to reach the one Will knelt on, agile and weary like a cat. She knelt similarly to him, though she took better care to avoid the puddle of blood at their feet so it wouldn't stain the blue tones of her dress with it. She placed the oil lamp that she had been holding between them both on one of the steps above to see what he was doing, and Will winced as it showed the frightening scene before them in clearer detail.

She glanced at Will's hands, now stained a deeper shade of red, and then at him. This time her gaze was softer. The pity in her eyes was clear.

"Who did this?" Her voice was soft but severe nonetheless.

For a moment, Will felt the urge to jump to his own defense. He couldn't help but concentrate far too greatly on containing the blood and keeping his pulse steady whilst doing so. It took up every thought in his mind, and now he had to focus on forming a coherent sentence and not breaking down into tears whilst doing so as well. He tried his best, and paid little mind to what came out because he could no more.

He was shaking. He was sure to have stuttered as well, but eventually he got it out. "*Him*. The Phantom..."

Will looked up at her, pure desperation in his eyes. He hoped she'd believe him. However fantastical it all sounded, he desperately hoped she'd take his word for what had occurred.

He saw a flicker of something in her own eyes. A kind of panic, as though she knew of that presence far too well. Perhaps it was in memory. Part of her seemed as though she had been expecting that answer, given that this wasn't the first time things like this had occurred. She nodded half an inch and spoke again.

"Go. I will take care of this."

Will hesitated for an instance, disbelieving of the notion that she would so easily let him leave. Once he processed the thought, he took his shaking hands away and grimaced when blood began to flow heavily once more. Bedelia quickly replaced his hands with her own. Her pulse was steady and her grasp was firmer than his, a welcome change. Will lingered on the ring she wore that was now stained with blood and thought of how he'd unwillingly brought another person into this, just as he had been unfortunate enough to come across it in the first place. He felt a growing sense of guilt. Bedelia ushered him away.

"You will not speak of this to anyone" She gave a final warning, and with that, Will began to walk in the opposite direction.

He struggled to find his balance over the staircase, still dizzy with knees now painfully bruised. He walked up the steps as fast as he could in the state he found himself in and turned a corner to the left without looking back once.

He rushed past the balconies and through the corridors nearby with only a vague idea of where he was going. It all seemed to become a monotonous and dark blur through his eyes. This part of the opera house wasn't all that familiar to him, and his state of mind didn't help his direction.

Some time passed, and Will eventually thought to have reached the dark passageways that he was familiar with. He could hardly see what surrounded him as he walked. There wasn't any clear source of light there beside a torchlight in the far distance that marked the placement of one of the first dormitories in that wing of the Palais. He took weary steps because of it, trying to make out everything that surrounded him in the dark so that he wouldn't trip. He could vaguely see the outlines of the pillars and stone busts at both sides of himself, though the usual dust and spiderwebs weren't as apparent in the dark. He continued to look out for anything that might be obstructing his path whilst making an effort to not disrupt the nights silence, and he stopped dead in his tracks with what he heard next.

The same voice from earlier called out to Will. It called out his name and it asked of him, though this time it was no demand. The sound was just as divine as when he'd heard it the first time, only it didn't possess that same element of a threat. Will should have felt threatened regardless, given everything that had occurred, but he didn't. Not truly. As shaken an wary as he was, Will couldn't prevent the urgent sense of curiosity that burnt through him. He needed to know. If it was only him standing there in the darkness, if his mind had been playing tricks on him all along, there stood chilling a possibility that he had tried to kill Freddie Lounds. That he'd simply shunned himself from the true memory of it in the height of his regrets...

At first, Will thought he'd heard the voice behind him, and so he turned just as fast as he'd listened in hopes of meeting his face. His heart was pounding. He was half-expecting to find a figure there, looming and shrouded by shadow. He saw nothing but stone busts and darkness in place of the Phantom, but his voice continued to resound all around him just the same. Soft but resonant, like a siren's song — And like a siren's song, Will was drawn to it just as a moth to a flame.

It surrounded him, and Will was dazed and confused as he wondered from where he spoke. He couldn't place it, that voice that continued to ask and not demand. To tempt, entice and entrance. The sound pulled him with a force that left him reeling. Death's solemn lullaby, and Will couldn't help but succumb to it. It was the voice of an Angel, an Angel of death…

The voice coaxed him gently, asking only that he close his eyes. Despite the warning bells that blared loudly in the back of his mind, Will found himself obeying without hesitation. His eyelids fluttered closed at the Phantom's request, and Will fought to keep his thoughts at bay. He resisted the urge to bring out the images that blossomed within his imagination, for he knew the power of suggestion, the potential of his mind. It could lead him down treacherous paths. Will feared what his visions might reveal, what cruel reality they might bring into stark focus. In his awareness, Will chose to remain within fantasy. He cleared every thought that crossed him to welcome the darkness instead.

Will's breath caught when he sensed a presence materializing in the darkness before him, a figure that seemed to coalesce with the very shadows themselves. The swift movement of a cloak sent a rush of cool air against his skin, and Will shivered because of it. Whether this was a trickery of his own mind or a chilling reality, Will was almost certain that he could hear the steady rhythm of the other man’s breath against his own strained and ragged intakes of air. It was a cruel contrast that only heightened his nerves all the more.

He questioned why he’d stayed, why he’d surrendered himself to the voice of a killer. A ghost, if that was even what he was. In that moment, Will was acutely aware of how helpless he’d allowed himself to become, how easily he’d been reduced to prey. Will’s pulse quickened with every moment that passed, a frantic beat that thrummed in his ears. Beneath the fear he felt, there was an undeniable pull, a magnetic force that drew him toward the source of that voice.

He didn’t dare to open his eyes. What Will didn't see through them he could feel regardless. The man who stood before him was tall — taller than him in the very least, for he loomed clearly above Will while keeping a careful, controlled distance between them.

That distance wasn't very great, Will soon realised, when the Phantom spoke to him once more and he felt the whisper of breath against his cheek.

The voice had urged Will to stay put. A shiver raced down Will’s spine, sharp and electric as it ignited every nerve within him. The thought of their closeness was as thrilling as it was terrifying, and Will’s heart pounded in his chest with a frantic rhythm that was almost deafening in the silence. The thought that he might be close enough for the Phantom to hear it too made his skin prickle with dread. Blinded by darkness, Will tried desperately to maintain his stance and not lean any closer, for he was afraid of what he'd find if he did.

He thought, for a moment, that it might be wise to take a step back. At the same time, a stronger want kept him where he was. Will felt an insatiable need to know more. As unwise of a thought as it was, Will wondered what would happen if he were to reached out to feel whoever it was that kept him so close. To open his eyes and see him for what he was. Angel or devil, man or ghost? Will simply wished to know of the man responsible for such a brutal bringing of death. To satiate the everlasting questions on his mind, and hope he wouldn't die by them. His curiosity consumed him, and Will knew he may never know why.

He was torn between thoughts. For the time being he did nothing but remain, expect.

Then the voice spoke to Will again, just a soft calling of his name, and however unlikely Will thought it'd be for his heartbeat to increase even more, it did. He was unsure if it was out of fear or simply because of the uncertainty of what was to come. Perhaps it was all of the above, or perhaps it was a consequence of not having been this close to anyone in this manner before…

"Do you *see* me now?

The Phantom asked. His voice was steady, devoid of the malice that Will had expected to hear before. It was concise and controlled, despite what one might assume of a person capable of such acts of complete violence. Will had anticipated for his own voice to betray his fear once he spoke, but he found that it resounded clearly when he did.

"Your face? *No*."

Will felt observed, and he could sense, instead of danger, a fondness in the eyes that he otherwise could not see. The Phantom remained as close as he had been, and Will's unsettlement faded into wonder with the realisation that he would not be hurt. That was not what the Phantom intended. So Will wondered, foolishly, if he should be so daring as to reach forward and *touch*…

He pushed away the Intrusion of such a thought, and the Phantom continued to speak in equal wonder to Will's own.

"...And yet, you saw the slaying that preceded you and viewed the acts that I committed as your own"

The voice was no longer decidedly neutral. Just as the gaze Will felt, it slipped ever so slightly and the Phantom's words were suddenly laced with an adoration that Will couldn't fathom being directed towards him... and yet it was. He didn't know what to think of it. He wasn't sure of how to act. The fear that had once coiled so tightly within him had begun to unravel, replaced by a sense of wonder, and Will could've cursed at himself for it.

He was almost certain that the Phantom had drawn even closer, and when the man spoke again Will found it to be true.

"I see you too, Will"

It was almost a whisper, so close at Will's side that he felt his breath graze him once more. Will wasn't sure if it was because of the sincerity of the claim or the closeness and use of his first name, but it made his breath catch and he was sure the Phantom had heard it as well. Embarrassment seized him, making his cheeks flush red. Will was grateful for the darkness that surrounded him and hopefully hid his blush away.

He heard the Phantom take a step back then, and a strange sense of loss filled the space between them. Oddly enough, It wasn't relief he felt because of it. No, Will wished to find out why. Was he going to leave him once more? Will didn't wish for his questions to go

unanswered. He didn't wish for the mysterious man to set out to hurt anyone else while estranged from Will's presence. His thoughts were interrupted by a question, once more.

"Did you hear my voice whilst you contemplated killing Freddie Lounds?"

The question was direct, cutting through the haze of Will's estranged thoughts like a knife. Will wouldn't have expected anything less. He answered as directly as the man that stood before him. "Yes."

Will couldn't explain it, but during the silence that followed he could have sworn he felt the other man smile. That devilish smile. No, he couldn't see it, but his intuition provoked the thought as strongly as if he had.

"You heard voices, yours and mine, try to guide you in your path yet you strayed from them both in favour of your instincts"

Will tried and failed to hold back a gasp when he felt a gloved hand caress the side of his face and settle around the base of his jaw. He found it hard to focus on the Phantom's words. Though caught off guard, he was more surprised by the affectionate nature of the act than the lack of violence it held. He wondered how hands capable of such violence could be so *loving* as well…

"With all of my knowledge and intrusion I could never entirely predict you…" The Phantom began, as close as he once was. "…the voice within you follows its own nature and is entirely beyond me"

There it was again. that adoring fascination, overwhelming in the intensity of his words. It resonated deep within Will, awakening a sense of intrigue that only grew with every breath shared between them. He couldn’t deny the pull, the irresistible lure of the unknown that beckoned him closer.

"Tell me, Will, if you were to follow your instincts right now, what would you do?"

The Phantom asked, and for the first time he seemed truly uncertain of the answer he'd receive. This time, he genuinely didn't know what Will would say.

....and Will didn't say anything.

Will didn't say anything, for he was unknowing of it as well. He only learnt of his answer once he acted on it. His instincts drove him forward, and so he leant and reached outwards to grasp the source of the dark angelic voice that seized him.

His arm reached towards the Phantom and Will wasn't sure if it was with the intention to attack or caress. He wasn't sure if he'd scratch and claw faced with the threat that he embodied or simply touch in the loving manner he himself had just been touched... To reciprocate the affection of his tone just to see what would happen next and hope it wouldn't end in loss of blood.

Will felt his hand fall across the Phantom's cheek and was just as surprised as he was at the contact. The steady breaths he'd heard before halted, for an instance sharp and unsure. As soon as Will reached out to find him again he felt the Phantom withdraw his hand from his jaw to grasp his wrist and impede what Will so wished.

Will exhaled sharply, startled. The gloved hand was swift in movement and it wrapped around his wrist in such a way that it almost bordered a sensation of pain, though not quite. Will winced, confused by the sudden change in demeanour. Then he remembered, or rather came to his senses, though in no way soon enough. Not nearly well enough to know for certain that he'd steer clear of him from now on... but he was talking to a *murderer*.

He was talking to a murderer, and he knew how unwise that was. Those same hands that caressed him like no other had before were hands that brought blades to people's throats without hesitation or remorse. That same man who longed for beauty also had a thirst for blood. His Angel of music, *an Angel of Death and the devil himself...*

Will opened his eyes then, newly unsettled, and as soon as he did the Phantom disappeared. With a swift flash of black veiling, his presence was suddenly gone…

...And Will found himself wondering when they'd meet again.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

In which the night's secrets emerge with the light of dawn, and Will is left to wander the fragile limits between madness and reason, innocence and guilt...

The manner in which Will woke up the next morning was nothing short of nightmarish.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. He hadn't really woken up because he hadn't been able to sleep since his return to his dormitory. He'd spent the remaining hours until sunrise lying on his bed and staring at the ceiling in silence whilst his thoughts ran circles around him. There, he lingered on the crime he wasn't sure he'd stumbled upon or *committed*. It was still so unclear to him, if he'd imagined or lived it after all. He wasted away with each persisting memory of withering heat and scarlet blood over his skin.

Of course, that inevitably led Will to think of the Phantom's harsh touches and whispered devotions that left him with the urge to both fight and succumb to them without knowing which impulse would win out in the end…

He replayed the memory of it in his mind and recalled each sensation. Each fleeting thought and unplaceable feeling. Every reaction he'd felt in response… He still didn't know what to think of any of it. He was only sure of the shame he felt at the knowledge that he wasn't as opposed to it all as he should have been.

He thought until he could no more, and before he knew it, the lights were lit at each doorstep and the others awoke at last. Will wasn't sure how much time had passed before they were all getting ready to go to the canteen. He felt alienated, more so than he usually was.

The girls acted ordinarily just as they did every other early morning; playful and lively as though nothing was wrong. For them it still wasn't, but Will was anxious with the knowledge of everything that had occurred. He was sick with worry just as he had been from the moment he returned from his unruly encounter with the Opera ghost. It was an encounter that Will wasn't entirely sure he'd even had, given the circumstances…

He was beginning to think that he was going insane.

The Phantom's voice stayed with him long after it had left. Will was starting to suspect that it only existed in his mind, and he trembled at the thought of what that meant. *Was he not innocent after all? ...Were his hands rightfully stained?*

He hoped that wasn't the case. But If he had indeed encountered the Phantom beyond his visions of that same night, he wasn't sure which was worse.

Sure, that meant he hadn't murdered Freddie Lounds in a state of delusion, but it also meant he'd given a merciless killer his mind and in turn been understood by it. He'd been seized by the voice of a man whose hands were stained red with incriminating blood and had keened at their touch regardless. Will didn't want to be known by someone so irredeemable. He didn't want to know what that might say about himself.

But as much as Will tried to push away the thought, he couldn't help but think of the tender words that had been voiced…

'I see you too, Will' the Phantom had said. And Will had found himself *wanting*. Prey to ardent temptation, Will had *wanted* to believe it… So he forced himself to *not*.

He was continuously striken with the bitter reminder of the nature of the man that had spoken those words so clearly without so much as a hint of insincerity. Will wondered how he could be so knowingly *naive*, for he couldn't pull himself away from what he knew was a *danger*. He was drawn to it helplessly, to that voice that both threatened and adored….

He tried to shrug it off as best as he could and stood up to join the line with the rest of the girls in the corridors outside. Abigail quickly took her place next to him once she'd finished fixing her hair in front of the shared mirror in their dormitory and Will, in a world of his own, hardly acknowledged she was there until she spoke.

"You're wearing different clothes to the ones you left with last night"

Will's emotions felt as though they were a world away. He was numbed with complete exhaustion and yet he still managed to feel a pang of guilt in his chest upon registering her words. He grimaced at the knowledge that what Abigail believed to be due to his supposed encounter with Alana was truly because his clothes had been drenched in *blood*.

It pained him even more to think she may soon find out. His stomach turned at the thought of it.

Will muttered something he wasn't sure was a question or an answer. Most likely neither. He was lost for words, and what came out was a weak sound hardly heard and therefore unnoticed. His eyes were dulled with fatigue and he hardly managed to hold Abigail's gaze as a result, but she didn't seem to pay any mind to it. She was too excited by her presumptuous thoughts.

"Your nightshirt. It's different."

She made no effort to hold back the girlish grin that all but screamed *'tell me. Tell me all that happened and more'* — Only she wasn't aware that what had occurred was devastating and so very forbidden to tell. She could never even imagine it. She didn't deserve the displeasure of having to know.

Will watched her in silence. He could see the increase in anticipation and expectancy through her eyes that glimmered ever-so-brightly with an unawareness that he envied for himself. She didn't yet understand the gravity of what had happened, and he hoped she never would.

Stuck on that thought, Will tried to find the right words to say in order to avoid telling the truth. He couldn't lie and say he'd been with Alana because the word would spread like wildfire only for her to find out and, surely, refute it.

At one point he felt tempted to say anything at all for the sake of knowing he still could.

Then, he considered giving in and being honest. To get it off his chest and tell Abigail about it all in hopes of finding, in her, that voice of reason he'd failed to hear within himself. Then again, that might have been the worst idea of them all. There really wasn't any right way of saying he'd witnessed a murder that he was worried he might have actually committed.

He couldn't say that. Of course not. He'd sworn to not speak of what occurred. So faced with doubt, Will stood frozen in place instead and became so much further distraught with no way to stop it.

He could see that Abigail was about to speak again. The playful grin pulling at her lips threatened to ask once more with questions even heavier with the implication of whatever she thought had happened the previous night. Before she could even try to utter the words that Will could almost see tipping over the edge of her tongue, he blurted something out. He couldn't listen to any of it anymore. He spoke up instead.

"I didn't see Alana last night."

His admission was followed with a look of staggering surprise, then the parting of lips that signified the very probable formulation of a hundred questions more. Luckily, Abigail's silence was forced and her questions postponed when they heard heeled footsteps come down the hall.

All the girls who were stood with them in the queue quieted down and leant mechanically against the wall to allow whoever it was to pass. At this time in the morning, it was routine for one of the caretakers to come down to do a roll call as well as check that all of the rooms were in line to then lock them so nobody could return thereafter until the evening.

Usually, Madame du Maurier was in charge of that task. But they found that the woman who rushed down the halls she passed bearing a lamp to brighten the way was unknown to all of them.

Something jingled in her hand with a metallic glint under the candlelight. She held the keys Bedelia usually brought to lock up the dormitories, but none of the girls had ever seen her before.

The woman hurriedly locked each of the rooms without looking inside of them for so much as a second. The other girls appeared as confused as Will undoubtedly was, though without the additional dread of knowing Bedelia had been present during the events of the previous night only for her to go missing now. The girls whispered between eachother, and Will and Abigail shared a look of equal wonder.

The woman looked as though she could be a servant or a maid of some sort. When she came between Abigail and Will to lock the door to their room, Will called out to her and asked the

question that was without a doubt on all of their minds.

"Where is Madame du Maurier?"

The maid looked up, and her expression was one of urgency and distress as though she were a deer caught in headlights. She hesitated for an instance as though forced to choose each word with care.

"Apologies, Monsieur. We have been instructed to not speak of this matter…"

This made Will's dread increase further. The maid rushed down the hall before he could even think to ask again. He felt his heart begin to pound heavily in his chest as he thought of all the different scenarios for what might have happened to Bedelia, after he'd been so foolish as to involve her in what took place during the darkness of the night…

Though oblivious in comparison, unsettlement seemed to reach the other girls as well. The air surrounding them was heavy and winter-cold and Will could hear, through their whispers and hushed remarks, how they spoke fearfully of a presence they didn't even know. They didn't know who they feared. But he was named regardless with an edge of terror to their words.

'Could it be due to him? The Phantom Of The Opera?'

Each of the girls wondered, with fear tainting the sweet pitches of their voices. They all jumped to conclusions, but none of them had felt the Phantom's dark caress like Will had. They hadn't been left breathless with the beauty of his voice only to then be disturbed by the extent of his violent capabilities that no *angel* should want to possess.

But he was no angel… *was he?* Will believed he could be. Nothing else could explain such dark divinity. After all, Lucifer had once been an angel before he was cast out to hell.

The whispers increased around him, and Will knew he might have been imagining them at that point. They were too intense to be real — Almost a sort of chanting as he heard the overlapping of words:

'Him. The Phantom of the Opera…'

Will's heart pulsed unpleasantly, causing a deep echoe that rang through his ears and accompanied the muttering voices. He felt the frantic urge to cover them despite knowing it would do no good. Will's desire for silence was almost painful at this point, and silence wasn't something his anxiety would allow.

Overwhelming it was, still, to hear all of those voices accompanying the ones that already existed in his mind. Will's own, that only served to deprecate him at every given chance, and then another that seemed adoring in it's influence. He couldn't get its words out of his mind…

Will's eyes were unfocused. His surroundings became a redundant blur of dark and light. He thought he may well faint, if he wasn't just dreaming after all…

As it turns out, neither scenario turned out to be true when Will found himself in the canteen with the other girls feeling more than a bit disoriented. It wasn't like he didn't know how he'd gotten there, but he'd been so lost in his own head that the memory of it was faint and seemed as though it had happened all too fast.

Will looked around himself and realised he was sat at the table with the others. Abigail was at his side. The initial feeling of unsettlement seemed to have faded amongst the girls once they'd found their way down to the canteen, and they no longer thought anything of Bedelia's absence as they talked amongst themselves over breakfast. Will sat reluctantly over the far end of the table with them, only he was still so very distraught.

He must have looked sickly and pale, he thought, judging by the glares he received from those that turned to look at him. If he did, it didn't surprise him considering how he felt. It reached a point where he started to question what was real and what was not.

Will hardly touched the piece of wheat bread in front of him. He held his head low and couldn't even listen to the girls' words as he watched them snicker and smile over the latest topics of interest in the Opera Populaire; be it their hardly-subtle dalliances with the younger men in the orchestra or the rumours of where their nights with them were spent…

Abigail engaged in their conversations here and there. But Will could see through the corner of his eye how she'd often turn distractedly to give him a concerned glance, though without speaking a word of it. Will didn't pay too much mind to her. His own eyes couldn't help but fluctuate between the blood moon shapes on his palms from having dug his nails into them and the empty seat across from him at the table that made him want to deepen those wounds all the more.

He wondered how nobody had mentioned Freddie's absence as he looked at the unoccupied space, then cursed when somebody actually did.

"Isn't it strange that Freddie has yet to arrive?"

Will curled into himself with dread and counted each moment left until they'd inevitably uncover the truth and his world would come crashing down over him. He recognised the next voice that spoke as that of Beverley Katz.

"I heard that she'd been spotted with one of the french noblemen that attended our last performance… She must have spent the night"

The girls broke out into giggles across the table at the implication and Will only felt a sense of unease. He followed their conversation more keenly than he felt he could. He desperately hoped this nightmare of his would finally cease.

"We should count ourselves lucky" Beverley explained whilst she spread butter over a piece of bread she'd cut in two. "I think I speak for all of us when I say that I'd rather not encounter Freddie Lounds"

"...Right, Will?"

Will straightened up, wide-eyed at the use of his name. Beverley smiled deviously at him without diverting her gaze for so much as a second as she spoke again with a loud emphasis on each of her words.

"From what I've heard, Freddie isn't the only one who spent the night in someone else's bed…"

The girlish laughter returned once more and Will suddenly felt all eyes on him. He looked down at the table and tightened his arms around himself, feeling much too aware of the blush that brushed over his neck and face.

Abigail turned to look at him, concern over her pleading eyes that realised their mistake of telling the other girls. "Leave him, he appears unwell"

"Certainly. I'm sure his night must have been quite sleepless…" another humorous remark.

Will felt the urge to speak against it but if he had he wouldn't have known what to say. The girls pried and pushed for details and Will couldn't do anything but pray that it would come to a stop and so he hoped an hoped further, the voices in his head louder with each plead, until it finally did.

The loud slam of an opened door was what forced the girls' abrupt silence this time. Everyone looked behind themselves to see who it was, and as it turns out, Frederick Chilton was the man responsible for such a sudden interruption. Gasps ensued all around Will and echoed throughout the canteen and it was then that he took notice of the stage managers appearance which was startling, if not worrying in the very least.

Frederick Chilton's expression was grave. Over the worrisome pull of his brow there were several different red and purple hues spanning over his right eye and cheek; the very probable result of several blows to the face, or an unfortunate fall. Will was certain of the first possibility, with the knowledge of everything else that had occurred the previous night.

Past the several bruises and very prominent black eye, Will noticed a raised wound starting at Chilton's hairline and receding into his scalp. Blood had dried there, and the wound was sewn together with what Will believed were four stitches, if not more. Clearly, that wound had resulted from him being hit with some kind of heavy object, Will was sure of it. But the other two smaller cuts on his brow and lip couldn't have been. They weren't severe enough to have been aimed for directly…

Will thought there might have been both a hit and a fall after all. The brace placed around Frederick Chilton's neck confirmed just as much. Now, he only wondered where Chilton had fallen from. A place where he would have been caught by convenience. Somewhere high enough to cause the added injury to his neck, but not enough to kill…

The stage.

Will noticed the subtle quiver of Chilton's lip, fearful. It was quickly masked with the raised tone of his voice.

"I have just returned from the nearest infirmary with news of the highest importance. It is with regards to the safety of each and every one of you all…"

The girls all looked between themselves. For what was probably the first time, they all seemed to hold a keen interest in the stage manager's words.

"Before I speak of anything that occurred, I must inform you of the changes that will be made. Rehearsals have been suspended for the time being, and you must all remain here together."

Will felt his heartbeat quicken and his breath become shallow with anticipation for what was to be said. Anxiety held its familiar grasp around his throat.

"You will under no circumstances leave this hall without supervision. If you are in need of anything, you may inform one of us. By evening you will be escorted to your rooms which will then be locked by key, so there is no risk of any of you getting out during the night"

"…Or anything getting in" Beverley murmured, teasing those at her side who began to feel afraid.

"What about Freddie Lounds?" A voice spoke up amongst those seated at the tables. "We believe she's alone with one of her suitors"

Will saw Chilton's breath catch at the use of her name which confirmed that he knew of what had occurred as well. Will only wondered how much Frederick knew. How much he had seen, if anything at all…

"As many of you know, me and Mademoiselle Lounds remained in the theatre hall last night once rehearsals were over to discuss the extent of her wishes for punishment in relation to Will Graham…"

Suddenly, all eyes were on Will again.

"Unfortunately, I suffered an attack there upon the stage and didn't come to learn of her whereabouts again until I regained consciousness and well…" there was a pause. "Let's just say her condition is quite grave"

The air was heavy and sharp as shards of glass as the beginning of the realisation of Freddie's ill fate struck the girls like bouts of lightning. They looked between themselves, eyes blown wide with bewilderment, and when they settled upon Will's own they almost seemed… *accusatory?*

Abigail's were the worst. Her eyes, pretty and doe-like, watched him with sickening worry. A question flickered across them, tainted with cynicism. *'was it you?'* it felt like a betrayal. He couldn't fathom her beginning to question him —*To fear him*— though he could understand why. His feud with Freddie had taken place just a few hours before, only for her to be attacked precisely when he'd left his room during the night with no true explanation for where he was and what he had been doing. He understood, but it didn't make it hurt any less.

He was surrounded, but he felt as though the people in his presence were worlds away. All of them against him, with the only remainder being the flickers of darkness at his side. The hints at a shadow failing to follow through and show itself for what it really was. In the midst of his derealization, Frederick Chilton's final affirmations only made Will feel endlessly worse.

"Last I heard she is in a deathly fragile state. We may be dealing with a *murder*, soon enough…"

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

In which accusation marks the beginning of a descent towards darkness, an Angel's fall...

Naturally, an investigation soon took its course.

Well, Will was sure it most likely *would* in the near future. Frederick Chilton had left the canteen with his guards and adversaries shortly after his discourse for what Will could only assume to be an interrogation of sorts. As it turns out, Freddie Lounds wasn't yet dead but gravely injured.

Regardless, murder — even when unsuccessful — was no insignificant thing when it was committed against the upper classes. Now it was all a matter of known motives, witnesses, circumstance, and in Will's case bad luck. It all depended on who claimed to have seen or heard what and who was daring enough as to accuse regardless of it, aiming for the easiest target on whom to pin it all.

Will knew it all to be protocol from the books he'd read. Detective stories, mythos, philosophy — all on the subject of criminology which had sparked his interest ever since he'd learnt to sneak into the Opera's Library at the young age of thirteen.

His memories of it were fond. Nights spent eternally curious, pent up between lavish shelves of dark oak that held the books he browsed and hid him away behind them with legs crisscrossed in sitting over the ground to welcome the pages he read. His fingers, that traced each letter that flickered under the hidden candlelight following each new word and marvelling at the last.

Initially, when Will didn't have a clue, most of what he'd read were mere recollections of fiction tainted with an overt theatricality that was more common for an Opera. Unfortunate choices. Will's rational mind found them hard to believe, but at least some of various key elements were always present no matter how whimsical the story was. Tragedy, vengeance, grief and justice, hate and love… Then, in the most intriguing of works, *bloodlust* and *desire* as one. The perspectives of killers and their desire so large that they're driven to kill by it. To consume and feel righteous in doing so. To love, and because of it, *destroy*.

Those kinds of books were a guilty pleasure of sorts to Will. He was intrigued, perhaps obsessively so.

With his knowledge of the stories he read, Will wondered how long it would take for a detective to appear on scene in the Opera Garnier. He took into consideration each work of

literature he'd ever read, turned over each of the written words in his mind, and He wondered if when the time came to profile and accuse, this awaited detective would lean more towards the world of the fantastical and pronounce the guilt of the opera ghost — or if he would take Will, the easiest target, and pin it all on him to save himself the grief as well as absolve the Opera's further darkening rapport with the crowds.

Will was certain he knew the answer when he sensed someone coming towards him. Still locked in the canteen, he couldn't bring himself to look up and be sure. Accusation and doubt kept Will's gaze on the ground and through it, the silence that enveloped him was worse than any spoken word.

Pointed shoes entered his viewpoint over the stone flooring. Forced to look up, he soon realised that the person watching over him was none other than Madame du Maurier. It was something of a relief to see her, except she looked… *normal?* Effortlessly composed with all the poise of a ballet dancer despite their circumstances — which made sense as she too had performed as a dancer for the Opera Garnier in her youth. Even so, not a feature of hers was out of place and not a single hint of distress could be found through her eyes that might allude to what had occurred.

It made Will doubt. *Had she really found him the previous night or had he imagined that as well?* She seemed perfectly intact in spite of having been there too, all while Will felt as though he was shattering.

"Monsieur Graham, you're needed in the Salon du glacier"

Her tone was direct, but not severe enough to raise awareness. *Careful.* The Salon du Glacier was hardly a private enough place to suggest secrecy, and it was chosen deliberately because of it. The underground vestibule in the heart of the palais would have been far more discreet, yes, but it might have suggested that they had something to hide, so it wasn't ideal. On the other hand, a discussion in the Grand Foyer, though far from secretive, would have given the impression of too much importance. This went beyond that, a subject far too significant to spare the subtlety.

This was so grave that they had to hide in plain sight.

Will swallowed hard as he stood to join Bedelia, who for an instance gave him lingering glance. It was meaningful in some way, but as soon as Will tried to figure out why her eyes quickly became unreadable. Glacier blue irises seemingly emotionless, perfectly precise and winter cold.

Will walked alongside her, always one step behind. He kept his head low as he passed the tables in the canteen with eyes raised just high enough to catch glimpses of table legs and nylon tights. With nowhere else to look, Will watched the swift flow of a deep blue skirt around Madame du Maurier's ankles. She walked with urgency, he widened his step to keep up.

Soon the the well-lit stone floors of the canteen hall turned dim as they reached the familiarly obscure and maze-like corridors in the Opera's underground floors.

Bedelia slowed her pace faced with the darkness, both of them stood between narrow walls lit by the oil lamp she held. It brightened the solemn expressions of the busts that surrounded them with passing flickers of light at each step and turn, and Will stilled in remembrance.

He fell weak to his own thought, the reminders of the previous night were far too strong. Will's breaths turned shallow as he remembered the threat of a lingering touch within those same halls. *His, the Phantom's.* The way he'd been taken by him — by hands that had killed but almost seemed harmless in Will's wake. And how Will had stood blindly, enclosed by darkness. Prey to a voice both imposing and adoring in its musicality and allure. Enslaved by the beauty of it, which made Will wish to know nothing more beyond the words that it spoke. Whispers of the night, spinning fantasies that could make one forget about all the evil in the world and at the same time convince them to succumb to the very notion of it. Held lovingly by malevolent hands, a thorned rose. Both equally deceptive, for the hands that hold it hide claws that are unforgiving in their very grasp.

The grasp of an Angel of music, an Angel of death…

The feeling of it lingered far after the Phantom had left. Will could feel the presence of his hands even now, ghosting absently over his skin with the lightness of brushstrokes. His skin tingled at the memory and he shivered coldly despite the rush of heat coiling inside of him, low as a kindling flame. A contradiction turned physical it seemed; Addled and distressed yet headily intrigued, Will dreaded to know where his curiosity might take him next.

He wasn't sure of what he should have really felt with regards to it all. Anything that differed from fear surely ought to have made him irredeemable. The glare that Will failed to notice from Madame du Maurier in the midst of his reminisce confirmed just as much, serving as clue that some part of what he'd felt or done or *had yet to do* surely must have been wrong.

He caught her eyes, she turned to look ahead of them both towards the endlessness of the dark when she was certain that she'd brought his attention away from his misplaced daydreams. Only then did she speak, ever-cautious.

"You will under no circumstances speak of what you saw." — She began, and *'who you saw'* went so loudly unsaid that it may as well have been spoken. "They must believe that I was the only one present when the attack on Freddie Lounds took place."

Will tensed at the uncertainty, anxious to know who had called apon him — who Bedelia had referred to as *'they'*.

"What am I to say?"

"Nothing that might suggest your involvement. You can't let them so much as consider that you could have been where you were... *Done* what they might believe you to have done"

"What about the Phantom?" Will cautiously allowed himself to ask. He regretted his very choice of words when Bedelia snapped a look at him once more, gaze particularly sharp.

"It would be wise if you didn't speak his name"

Will hesitated for an instance, but he couldn't help but hold out *hope*, knowing that maybe he wasn't insane after all. That it had all truly happened the way he'd believed it had. That he hadn't been imagining it all along...

"But you know he exists." He affirmed, emboldened. "You never doubted that it wasn't me who had done it… maybe they won't either, if I'm truthful."

"As far as the rest of the world is concerned there is no Phantom of the Opera." A harsh affirmation. "It's in your best interest to keep your silence if you don't want to be taken for a fool. Or worse, a *murderer*"

"But you've seen him. I'm sure you have… Does he look the way we've all been told?"

The question was out of place, and certainly not important to the interrogation they were most likely about to face — but the various rumours that Will had heard from the other girls about the sightings of the Opera ghost forced him to ask. Stories he'd never once cared to believe, but now that he'd met the very man they spoke of, he was desperate to find out.

These rumours unsettled him, for they told tales of a death's head, so gaunt that it was more similar in appearance to skull and bone than what you'd expect of a living man. Sunken eyes black as coal, obscure as a glimpse of death through pools of darkness with no foreseeable end. Then his skin, sickly pale with an unnatural pull over features that were so vague that they almost appeared absent. Lacking a nose, disfigured at the lips with the only trace of a grin bearing the purpose of marking the limits of the macabre over his face; inherently sinister, jagged and bruised. It couldn't be.

It couldn't be. A voice like his own that rivaled that of the angels couldn't belong to such a *monster*. Will couldn't even begin to believe it, but his own doubt forced him to entertain the thought.

Then again, it was difficult to doubt when nobody had ever mentioned the singular thing that Will knew for sure.

Nobody had ever spoken of such a voice…

"Will Graham." Bedelia warned, interrupting his previous questioning. "Whatever interest you've gained I suggest you lose it. You should not hope to see him and expect to come out of it *alive*." She paused, a subtle strain to her voice when she spoke next as though something between exasperation and worry — "You should not hope to see him *at all* knowing the extent of what he's done."

Will fell silent, resisting the urge to speak the endless flurry of questions on his mind as he and Madame du Maurier began to reach the end of a passage through which he saw light. The look of concern that had taken to her features as she suggested that the Phantom would kill him admittedly stirred him away from his previous intrigue to know more (…to know *him.*) — but so did the rumours of his abhorrent face. It was that, most of all.

He was unsure of what to trust. Lost and in need of something to believe, Will thought it best to push away all thoughts of the Phantom for the time being. The light at the end of the

passage revealed a set of stairs that led way to the ground floor. Once there, they walked through one of the hallways on the sidelines of the entrance hall; a relief, as it was significantly broader and not lacking in sufficient light.

As they travelled through it, Will came to realise that they were quite close to the Grand staircase where the dreadful events of the previous night had occurred. His view was obscured by walls and pillars but he didn't divert his gaze away from it regardless. He felt compelled to look in hopes of catching a glimpse and seeing how it compared to before. Of course, he couldn't help but wonder if the pools of blood remained or if they'd wiped it all away already, lost to the memory of those by whom it had been seen.

Finally, after passing the galerie du Glacier, Will and Bedelia entered the circular hall where they had been called to meet. The Salon du Glacier was large, though not nearly as intricate as its counterparts. As Will entered the rotonde, he hardly got the chance to linger on its colourful murals placed between the large embellished windows in the far back before he heard a voice call his name.

"Will!" He wasn't able to so much as turn his head to look in the voice's direction before he heard a rush of footsteps and found himself against the weight of someone else's hold.

Alana.

She held him so tightly that it seemed as though she'd never let go. Will remained practically still, wondering if he should put his arms around her in turn or limit himself to how he stood. He chose the latter. His guilt resurfaced at the memory of their previous encounter, all whilst he recognised the undeniable comfort he felt between her arms. A comfort tainted by uncertainty, for he was unsure if he wanted to lean in and drown in her essence or jump back and, once more, run away.

Alana stepped back to look into Will's eyes, hands immediately jumping up to push the stray strands of messy hair away from his face with care. Her fingertips brushed softly over his temples and that was soothing in itself. Her gaze over his own expressed endless sorrow, compassionate, just as her voice.

"I've been deathly worried about you ever since I was first informed of what occurred." She expressed, hands settling gently over his face to cup his cheeks. "Please tell me the other girls are okay"

"I can assure you they're all in good health, Madame Bloom." Bedelia intervened, ever-polite.

With that, Will and Alana came apart. She returned to the opposite side of the Salon from where she'd approached him, and Will stopped in his tracks for an instance once he looked beyond the murals he'd first seen and came to know what he'd previously missed. He was hesitant to follow her once he'd realised that in the centre of the room, stood below the chandelier, was Frederick Chilton. Chilton was accompanied by another man that was unknown to him, and so the anxious pit in Will's stomach reached a new low.

Both of them watched him, expectant. Will did nothing but silently return their persisting gaze until Bedelia approached him from behind and subtly coaxed him to follow suit. As they

neared the two men, Chilton flashed them a smile that was shallow more than it was sincere. Will couldn't help but notice how one of his eyes crinkled further than the other as the one was swollen and bruised.

"Monsieur Graham, allow me to introduce you to the man that will be aiding our investigation in the foreseeable future with regards to last night's ambush in the theatre hall"

Just like that, Will's suspicions of the upcoming interrogation were suddenly confirmed and he braced himself for it. He swallowed, directing his gaze towards the man at his left who stretched a hand in Will's direction just as quickly as he'd met his gaze.

"Jack Crawford" the man introduced himself, clear and self-assured. Will shook his hand in turn and with that, Chilton resumed his previous boasting.

"Monsieur Crawford here has very generously offered to adopt the position of lead detective for this case." With a hand over Jack's shoulder, he directed himself at Will.

"You yourself won't be able to recall this as you hadn't yet come to reside in the Opera Garnier at the time, but Monsieur Crawford carried out an investigation as the chief of police for a series of murders that occurred just over a decade ago, right here where you stand."

Chief of police. Will noted. It came as no surprise, Jack Crawford was a man with a presence that suggested authority. Physically, he was broad and sturdily built; secure. He appeared resolute and unwavering, admirably so, but at the same time unfeeling and direct in favour of his motives, as lawful as they ought to have been.

A lifetime of experience preceded him, that much was clear. His skin showed the consequences of a demanding way of life, coarse and resilient like tan leather, bearing the markings of his past.

"Yes, it's been a long time since then." Jack concurred. It was Bedelia who spoke next.

"I cannot even begin to express my gratitude for you remitting you retirement to aid us in this case." she began. "These times must be very challenging for you I'm sure."

Will watched her. He knew Bedelias subtle mannerisms well enough that he soon came to understand this was a draw against Jack, a distraction.

"…I'm very sorry to hear about the condition of your ill wife."

There it was. Now, Will's had only one question. *Was Jack was so much of a threat that such resorts were necessary?* Will didn't wish to find out, but he observed him next to be sure. Jack had winced at the words. Clearly whichever condition it was, it seemed as though incurable. As stoic as Jack surely was, his weakness was his love, and so he distanced himself to hide it. — Feigning that the reminder wasn't wounding at all.

"Thank you, Bedelia. These years I'd hoped I'd never have to return to this place for motives such as the ones that brought me here the first time."

Chilton, seemingly obvious to the rather lamenting tone, proceeded to joke with little care.

—"Well, none of us could have possibly expected that the killer you scared into hiding would mark his return after twelve years."

Jack chuckled, brief and rather forced. "I have yet to determine that" His tone was almost dismissive, and with that he looked at Will a determination that made his next statement clear. "I was hoping you could help me with that"

"is alright by you?" Was added. Obligation masked with an interrogation, of course, Will nodded in assent. He braced himself for the first question, then took it as it came.

"How would you describe your relationship with Mademoiselle Lounds?"

It was an obvious question; essential in all protocol. Still, Will's shoulders were tense and his mouth dry when he went to speak. "There wasn't a relationship at all" he stated rather bluntly, voice unsurprisingly rough before it was able to adjust. He cleared his throat. "She starred as the lead, I danced and sung vocals in choir with the other girls. We rarely crossed paths."

"And yet, from what I've been told, there happened to be a conflict between you and her just last night"

Will cleared his throat once more, fighting the urge to run from Crawford's peering and endlessly skeptical eyes. He couldn't help but shy away from them, lowering his gaze to the wooden floors. "Yes"

"What could you tell me about that?"

The question was irritating in itself. He ought to have known, having previously spoken to Frederick Chilton. *Was this a test?* It all came too close to seeming like some sort of game. The feeling was less than ideal, but in the very least it suggested that Jack was desperate to gain any kind information on the case. Willing to play games he's too ignorant to win in order to pin Will down under the prospect of guilt for a crime he didn't commit. *Clearly*, Jack didn't know enough.

"I happened to come across her dog in the late afternoon" Will explained, purposely vague knowing he'd taken it from her boudoir. "She was outraged to find out that Bijoux had been under my care, and I was demeaned for it."

Jack seemed to jump at that last statement. It seemed he had been told after all, only this was, of course, a provocation.

"You were demeaned, yes you were. Threatened with the promise of destroying your future, making you leave. You were insulted, made out as a fool… was all of this your means to impede it?"

As if the accusation couldn't be clearer, Jack asked further.

"Did that make you feel the need to act out *violently* against Freddie Lounds?"

Bedelia and Alana almost startled at the implication. Will watched as Alana, with a hand just over her mouth to touch her bottom lip, jumped to his defense. "Jack, you couldn't possibly

think that he…" she shook her head. "Will isn't violent. He never has been. He's a young boy for heavens sake! He doesn't possess the wrath of men, Jack, he couldn't have…"

"Then he'll have no problem answering my questions truthfully." Jack replied, hardened on his accusation. He'd certainly sensed the sentimentality, a bias on her terms. "Will, where were you last night?"

Will's throat tightened. This was one of the questions he wasn't prepared to be asked. Will was blinded by every possibility for what he could have said; anything but the truth. — but nothing seemed a stable possibility. Will couldn't even convince himself once he spoke. "I was in one of the dormitories" he claimed, entirely unsure. "In my own" he clarified.

Of course, jack knew a lie when he heard it. Not to credit him, because Will knew he hadn't hidden it all that well. He clenched his fists in trying to still his own anxiety, nails digging painfully into the marks he'd left the night before.

"Now, Will, if I were you I'd rethink my answer here. What would I be told if I were to ask the young girls you share your chambers with?"

Through those words came a realisation. Stricken fatally by the premise of the many witnesses of his rumoured affair, Will accepted his defeat on its grounds. He knew he had no choice but to say what Jack would otherwise come to know.

Eyes fixed on his perpetrator, Will was bitter in letting out the words. "They'd tell you I spent the night with Alana Bloom"

Gasps ensued around him and Will felt shame like never before. He lowered his head, well aware of the heat of embarrassment now blinding his senses. He only dared to look up for a fraction of a second and it all seemed to become endlessly worse when he saw the look of visceral concern over Alana's face, bordering horror, even disgust. Will almost felt angry then.

"But that's not- I never… Jack, I never…"

"Yes, Madame Bloom is right." Will raised his head, eyes avoidant. "I never got the chance to see her."

"And why is that?" Jack questioned, increasingly skeptical.

"Whilst I wandered the halls to reach her Bedelia caught me in the act and urged me to return to my room, for we are not allowed come out at night."

"I see. Did you?"

"Yes, I was quick to return. She seemed unsettled in telling me she'd heard a noise, and presumably that's when…"

"Yes, I know." Jack interrupted, sparing a retelling of the gruesome details. "Madame, is this true?"

"Yes Monsieur." Bedelia affirmed. Perfectly clear, perfectly calm. Will wondered how many more times she'd done this before.

"Can anybody else account for this?"

"No." Will tried to mimic her assurance in his own words. "The girls were already asleep upon my return"

Jack nodded, though clearly dissatisfied. Will knew he'd stop at nothing to disprove the integrity of their claims. He wondered if there were any witnesses that could counteract them. Surely not, unless…

Unless. Will was hit with the realisation that Freddie had *seen* him, standing before her like he was. His world darkened as he saw it. He only hoped she'd remember it the way it occurred. Remember that he'd saved her, taken mercy on her after all despite knowing she deserved that fate. Knowing that part of him had wished to see her die... To watch her bleed and let the currents of her own blood mark her fall.

Of course, the other part of him lived in fear and utter horror that he could have had such a thought. He must have been senseless, unlike himself, crazed… anything but sincere.

Regardless, one point stood. He hadn't brought the incriminating blade to her throat. So, he hoped. He hoped that she'd recognise it and not speak against him; to promise to absolve him of that risk. Then again, that meant he'd be at the mercy of her words...

So better yet, Will hoped she'd never regain the ability to speak again, if she were to live at all.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

In which a night's illusions dance along the verge of madness, hinting at truths that have yet to be unveiled...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will made his way towards the centre of the stage in strides of light, gracious footsteps. He turned to face the auditorium, causing a flourish of the pristine white robe that framed his figure and cascaded beyond his feet to gently brush the wooden floors. Graced by the pointed lights that beamed from far above him, Will looked as though clothed in the likeness of an Angel touched by heavenly light.

His surroundings were grand just as they always had been, only the theatre hall was obscured by darkness, untouched by his light. There was nobody in the audience. In their stead faint shadows seemed to pass casted by the gentle sway of the tall and bejeweled chandelier — Only the chandelier wasn't supposed to sway at all.

The gentle light casted from within it was peculiar, faint and cold like moonlight in place of its usual luminosity and warmth. It was a welcome change, for the contrast seemed to heighten Will's presence all the more. He embodied the sun, ardent like a burning star. Adorned by Saturn's rings in the form of glinting traces of silver in the jewellery he wore.

Despite the lack of spectators beyond the light that enclosed him, Will felt a sense of importance, a duty to perform. Softly, he smiled, nimble hands reaching beyond himself as though the lights that shone above him were something more. Paths to something ethereal, divine yet unknown.

With a parting of lips he went to sing. In that very moment and with a precision unmatched, a voice that wasn't his own resounded from far behind him. It forced Will's silence before he could even begin to speak — or rather left him lost for words.

Wounded and obscure, the Phantom's voice possessed a depth only true to tragedy. A darkness that evaded all warmth. Even so, Will was taken by it. Enraptured, bewitched… perhaps even comforted by his very sound for he knew the torment in the man's voice to be familiar to his own. Despite the obscurity of it all… his words still seemed to border the *seductive*. And Will surprised himself when he found himself leaning into it, eyes fluttered closed as he basked in the attentions of such a haunting serenade.

Come to me, Angel of music…

The voice only seemed to come closer. Despite Will's initial surprise, it all began to feel as though it was meant to be. The line between what once was and what was to be began to blur, now indeterminate. This was no longer what Will had predicted to be an Aria, singlehandedly performed. No, this was a pas de deux. A duet of sorts, if Will was to let himself be carried away by the temptation of it all.

Even worse, psyche emboldened, a part of Will came to understand that this was a courting, a blatant pursuit — *a chase*. Sincere and far beyond anything that could be merely and solely performed. *Dangerous*, and therefore tempting all the more. Perhaps Will was doomed to dance along the very precipice of this maddening pursuit and orchestrate his own fall.

In fear of that fate, Will began to wonder. *Could there be another way?* He knew he may well give into temptation and blindly follow in this ghost's paths… But perhaps if he could perform, *only* perform. If he were to allow himself to give in whilst remaining within the bounds of safety, *of fiction,* and solely upon the stage he found himself above, could it then remain *just* an act after all? Could he be absolved of the guilt of wanting to follow the voice that reigned so completely over his mind? …That very voice called in the midst of his questioning.

Come to me, Angel of music… Sing for me, Angel of music…

—And Will leant into the Phantom's embrace before he could even begin to answer such a question for himself. The single step back he'd taken felt endlessly precarious as though it was a leap into the dark and yet Will had *taken it.* Stern arms held him now, an act of possession through which Will was now willingly entrapped. The Phantom loomed closely behind him, the press of his figure firm against his back. It rendered Will feverish, just as the open palms that rose to feel the surface of his chest. Will breathed, conflicted yet weak to the lift of fabric beneath the other man's ravenous touch. Wandering fingertips skimmed between his ribs, just barely above the white lace that clothed him. Their grasp tightened suddenly and Will gasped. His head lulled back, lips parting to welcome the passing of breaths that strained with an anticipation for something, *anything.* He remained beneath the stage lights still, only now they were eclipsed just as the darkness of his own irises; tainted by lust, no longer crystalline.

One of the Phantom's hands shifted to hold Will's own, still reaching. Their fingers laced and slowly, Will began to turn. He was held with reverence despite the longing he so clearly sensed. The scales of reason within him threatened to tip towards indulgence, tantalising in their risk, pristine white robes threatening to loosen and fall. Those first steps that him and the Phantom took upon the stage in unison marked the beginning of their madness, a delicate dance, a pas de deux. With a gentle twirl lead by the Phantom's hand Will turned and they were only brought closer together, *so maddeningly close*...

…but Will made one grave mistake.

He opened his eyes and the face that met him was *shadow*, the hand that grasped him was *bone*. Upon looking at his own hands Will realised that they were bloodstained, and the fingers that once held his own with a promise handed him a dagger. Will clutched it, its handle tainted crimson red with a blade that looked as though it had been used. Bleeding

rivers at his feet was Freddie Lounds. She held his gaze, blood spewing. The voice behind Will forced him to stay as he was and watch her, and it whispered,

"See? *...See?"*

Will awoke shuddering violently in his place. His hitched breaths carried across the early morning's silence, sweat cooling over his face and causing his skin to prickle despite the underlying heat he felt. He'd become tense, limbs stiff with fear with fists clenched around the covers that had long before slipped back. His face and neck were flushed red for what he could only assume to be fear, too. Will only startled once more when his eyes focused and he saw a face before his own, watching him. Beverly leaned close, beaming in her familiarly mischievous way. "you okay there?"

Will struggled to lift himself up, grossly aware of the awkward dampness of his skin and the frantic nature of his movements as though he had something to hide — perhaps he did. "what are you doing here?" He groaned, irrationally concerned that she might've seen all that played out in his mind. She must have seen through it regardless due to how very flushed and breathless he still was.

"I came here to wake you, but you seem to have done that all by yourself" with a swift movement she ceased to lean over the side of his bed to instead stand against the mirror across from him. "Do your nightmares always get you like that?"

Wether she meant fearful or flustered, Will didn't know. Except, really, he did. Fear fit the concept of a nightmare where lust did not. The implication was obvious, therefore. "I find that my dreams are often… misleading." He explained, and whilst he spoke her eyes seemed to wander, settling lower.

"Not a nightmare then?" She smiled, foxlike. It felt more like a statement than a question. Her eyes were still fixed on him, coaxing Will to raise his knees towards himself and pull up the covers as well as he could with what he thought to be a subtle shift. "Perhaps not at first."

She cocked her head with interest. "Tell me all about it" she said, and though his breaths were finally levelled, Will made a strangled noise. He struggled to put it all into words, eventually settling upon one. "Conflicting may be just the term for it."

"*Conflicting?* I see…" Beverly remarked with an emphasis that left Will alarmed, though nowhere near as much as what followed after it did."This conflict of yours relates to your desire for *Alana Bloom* does it not?"

"—Is she the reason for your endless slumber?" Beverly phrased her words theatrically, giggling. She was eager to hear what she thought she had already come to know.

Will felt the blood drain from his face as he watched her and dawned upon her words "No. No, not at all" he frowned, confused. He was admittedly mortified that all of this had read as… *desire?* He knew it couldn't have been, for if it was it would make the *Phantom of the Opera* the cause. Will couldn't think of anything worse. Luckily it was a dream, nothing more. And regardless, there was a bigger issue for which he had to ask. "the topic of Alana and I is still being discussed?"

It had been over a week, after all.

"Oh, Will." Beverly grinned. "Your affair is nothing short of a scandal!" she reached forward to trace the mirror's engraved frame with her fingers "but tell me then, if not because of this, why ever do you wake up so late?"

Will hesitated for an instance, stuck on his previous thought. The affair he'd never had, the dream he'd once thought to be real and the man he now hoped wasn't. "My thoughts often keep me up at night" he stated bluntly. "If it weren't for our current restrictions I'd spend my evenings wandering the halls"

"To see Alana Bloom?" Beverly asked, her eyes sparkling with both surprise and hope for new advancements on the apparent 'scandal' he'd caused. The sparkle quickly faded the instant he said no.

"Then…" she remained silent for a moment, contemplative, only to gasp and then exclaim "to meet someone else?!"

No, *No.* Will knew he should have immediately said no. Silence was as good as a death sentence when it came to matters of this sort. Saying nothing was just as grave as a sure confirmation. Still, he stared at Beverly blankly and spoke not a word. He felt defeated faced with her cheerful relentlessness in trying to discover his secret *paramour.*

She watched him, expectant. Will debated on what to say while he still could. If he'd said yes and confirmed that his intentions were to meet someone else it would have only been a half-truth — but a complete denial of it would have also been a *lie*. Perhaps Will should have agreed on having wished to meet Alana and let the preexisting rumours of their affair run their course. He could endure that, so long as there was no mention of *anyone* else.

Moments passed, Will still said nothing.

"So I'm right!" Beverly squealed, practically lunging forward to sit beside Will over the side of the bed. "Who is it?"

"There's nobody else." He denied, though half-heartedly. "You're far ahead of yourself"

Beverly looked into his eyes for a long moment, analytical. She seemed to conform to his denials, soon standing up once more to reach the doorway "Well whatever or *whoever* the cause of your dreaming, I should inform you that your days of sleeping in are over" She grinned. "We have rehearsals at last"

With that, Will followed Beverly down to the theatre hall as fast as his feet could carry him. They soon reached the stage, and oh what a relief it was to finally be able to move freely above the broad flooring he'd become so familiar with over the years and stretch his legs, no longer confined to crowded bedrooms and canteens. The other girls seemed to share the same sentiment as they all gathered in the middle and laughed, and talked, and danced all in an effort to remember the steps they'd begun to forget because it really had been that long. Or perhaps it just felt like it.

Will looked around himself. First at the girls in the corps, then at Madame du Maurier who conversed with one of the maids on the far end of the stage to the right. Will's eyes flickered quickly over Alana as to not meet her gaze, and from what he saw she appeared to be supervising the other girls. Will turned around and looked out towards the auditorium in order to avoid her further. Bright lights shone above him, and Will's eyes skimmed between scarlet floor seats and private boxes that started low on the walls and appeared to reach the highest of floors. He settled on the chandelier, always sparkling. Thoughts of his dream clouded his mind like the most intoxicating of memories and he felt an anxious spark within himself. It was a strange feeling, for it wasn't entirely unpleasant. It felt more like a want.

Will felt tempted to lean into those thoughts again. To see how real it could feel whilst he stood upon the very stage where it had all taken place in his mind just hours before. Lights blaring, feet shuffling with arms reaching once more. Will was curious to know where his imagination would take him next, but part of him feared what would happen at the very end if he were to allow these visions once more. He wondered if he could change that outcome, unstained by blood and still dancing in neverending bliss. The idea of changing what he'd first dreamt left Will wondering if he could see the Phantom's face for what it truly was if he were to try that as well. Not shadow, not death, but an *angel*. The face of a mortal man that spoke to him clothed by darkness in a maze of blackened halls.

Will's thoughts were interrupted when he felt a tap on his shoulder. "Come sit with us, Graham" Beverly called. "You're not shying away from yet another conversation that has you in the very centre of it"

Beverly took Will's arm to bring him to where the girls all sat and he followed behind her without putting up a fight. He sat awkwardly, legs crisscrossed. At this point it wasn't in the least bit unusual for all eyes to be on him but it felt daunting nonetheless.

"I was just pleading your case" Beverly quipped as she went to sit beside him.

"Let me explain." She began. "Some of us were a bit… apprehensive, when we found out about what happened to Freddie *just* after your little fight"

"We don't think you're a murderer" another intervened, and some laughed as if incredulous that the thought had ever crossed their mind. "We never doubted your involvement with Madame Bloom that night, but you must understand that we had to be sure of every possibility."

Will winced as he thought of how Alana had most likely overheard what was just being said. He spoke then. "What changed?"

"When that detective came asking around and demanded to speak to each and every one of us I soon figured he hadn't found anything of use with regards to you at all" Beverly explained. "I will say though, he's convinced you're guilty of the crime. You will need to work hard to prove yourself as innocent"

Will carefully considered her words before startling at a sudden grab at both of his shoulders. He sighed with relief when he realised that it was Abigail, who stood behind him to rejoin the

group "I'm not sure what Monsieur Crawford could possibly see in Will to suggest that he's guilty" she smiled, squeezing him again. "Just look at him, he's harmless!"

Everyone laughed lightheartedly. Will smiled with them for what was probably the first time in a long while, as far as he could recall. He was grateful and so very relieved knowing for sure that Abigail didn't suspect him. That she didn't see him in a different light.

He looked up at her, noticing the sequinned skirt and drapes she wore. "Why are you wearing your costume?" He asked.

"Madame Bloom has told me in advance that we are to prepare to perform our first act in short" She leaned into to the group, speaking in a more hushed tone as though what she was going to say next was one of the greatest of secrets to ever be told. "they are going to select a new lead to replace Freddie Lounds based on how well we do today"

The girls all gasped in unison, and before Abigail could even say the word they all rushed to get their things from the backstage. Will was the last to stand. Only him and Abigail were left behind, and she eyed him curiously.

"Well, aren't you going to get dressed?" Abigail asked. Will had yet to grasp the extent of what it all meant, for him and for all of them. Was Freddie to ever come back? Who was to perform the aria in her stead? Not him, surely not him. That was to only be made possible in his dreams, and even so, those semed to turn murderous and suffocatingly obscene.

"I suppose" he replied in short, absentminded. Abigail fixed Will's hair affectionately, tucking stray curls out of the way. "I have a feeling that this may turn out better for you than what you might expect"

Will scoffed "you couldn't possibly think that I, out of all of us, would be the one to play the lead in the Opera"

Not even in his wildest of fantasies had Will entertained that thought. Except he had, it was so very often that he had. He secretly wished for all that was grandiose. He could never say it. He could never stand to audibly break that illusion for himself. It would break him all the further.

"You can't just discard the possibility" Abigail argued. "Alana Bloom favours you, after all"

A pained look overtook Will's features "Not anymore" he said, knowing it ought to have been true after seeing the way she looked at him when he'd been forced to tell Jack that he'd intended to find her in her boudoir.

"What ever happened?" Abigail questioned, brows furrowed. The simple answer Will gave was enough to make her understand. "She knows."

Abigail pressed a palm to Will's shoulder, endless sympathy in her eyes as she realised the extent to which Will was affected by it all. "It's no matter" she stated, and she appeared sincere in saying so.

"Frederick Chilton will be the one to make the final decision on who the lead will be" she said, and Will was unsure about how that would change the outcome at all. If anything it made it worse.

"As much as the both of you may dislike each other, Monsieur Chilton needs someone who can sing" she explained. "You, Will, can sing"

Will could feel himself rush to state excuses and raise contradictions to what she'd just said. He was unsure as to why he had such high defenses up against himself. Perhaps he didn't want to allow himself a hope that may very well be crushed in the end.

"I sing no better than the other girls in choir" he counteracted. Abigail pursed her lips, knowing what Will was doing just as well as he knew it for himself. She knew him better than anyone. They'd spent most of their childhoods together, after all.

"Do you remember what you used to do on stormy nights when we were children? When I was too scared by the loud roaring of the thunderstorms to sleep and you were too preoccupied caring for me to ever leave my side?"

Will remembered. *How could he not?* "Perhaps I might, but I don't see how that's important now"

Abigail smiled. "You'd sing to me. You'd sing me lullabies ever so gently, and the sound would carry over the violent sound of lightning bolts despite how dreadfully loud they'd often be by themselves"

Will couldn't help but smile at her words, shy to how sweet of a consideration it was. She continued, in awe of the memory. "Your voice was so soft and yet it made the thunderstorms pale in contest without an effort to be made. You sang just as beautifully then as you do now, Will, I'm sure of it"

There was nothing he could say to that. Nothing that words could describe. So instead Will went rushing towards the supply rooms in the backstage to get dressed for the performance he'd not long ago wished to avoid. The other girls had already returned by then, he could hear their echoed clamouring from the outside. He shuffled through hangers bearing all kinds of frivolous costumes, most of them unworn.

As soon as he found the one suited for their act he began to undress. Will could hear Alana call out to the girls from the other side, instructing them to find their places. He could vaguely make out Chilton's voice as well, an easy recognition made of his inept remarks.

What Will hadn't expected to hear just yet however, was the Maestro's cue preceding the overture for the first act. The very one that he was now realising he was *late* to. Will froze in place, unsure if he should make the delayed start or simply stay back and let them proceed uninterrupted. With a surge of withering determination and without giving it a second thought, Will forced himself out of the room. Tripping on the sequinned drapes that barely hung over his shoulders, he stumbled out onto the stage and froze once more when everybody seemed to look his way. The girls continued to dance regardless of his sudden entrance. Will

scanned the room, lost as to how he should follow in their steps now that they'd already begun.

Beverly came to stand beside him then. She brought him towards the rest of the group subtly enough with a skillful spin. "Keep up" she said hurriedly, and Will focused his attentions on the pirouettes at hand. He followed Beverly as closely as he could, taking a step forward, however many steps he failed to recall having to take in the opposite direction before the plié and temps levé and… perhaps he shouldn't have gone back. Perhaps he should have left, he thought. But it was too late now. He had to follow through with the wreck he'd just caused for himself.

Will was unsure of how many pirouettes he'd landed before Chilton was seemingly kind enough to end his suffering, or simply ignorant enough to not wish to watch the entire act. "I've seen enough" the man announced, looking back and forth between a select few that had caught his eye.

"Who is she? Over there, towards the left." Chilton pointed at Abigail, who picked herself up from the stance she'd concluded her performance in and looked back in wonder of what he'd ask of her next.

"Abigail Hobbs, an exceedingly good pupil within the corps" Madame du Maurier spoke up, seemingly content with a choice made by Frederick Chilton for what appeared to be the very first time.

Chilton squinted as he looked at her, seemingly pensive. Will could admit that he was less unfortunate to watch now, with the swelling and discolouration of his right eye having mostly faded to nothing. At some point afterwards Chilton seemed determined.

"I want her to play the lead" He stated, and Abigail's eyes grew wide with surprise. "The girl will perform as Aphrodite in the upcoming Opera" he established once more to be sure and with that, he turned on his heel to dismiss the act.

Will felt a pang in his chest. Disappointment perhaps? *Oh how foolish that was.* Muttering voices resounded all around him as the girls whispered, hardly subtle with their thoughts. Abigail hadn't moved from her place, still stunned by what had just occurred. Will thought for a moment to congratulate her, or in the very least try.

He watched her, and for a split second Abigail glanced back. She appeared sorrowful and Will only hoped his understanding would come across to her in turn. Perhaps it hadn't, as she soon tried to intervene in what they all already knew to have been decided.

"Wait, Monsieur, Wait!" She called out, and Chilton turned just before he was set to disappear within the halls. The rest eyed her curiously, and regrettably Will knew what was to come.

"Monsieur you can't make me the lead, I can't sing!" She exclaimed, almost helpless. Chilton looked at Bedelia du Maurier in turn.

"it is by my understanding that all of the girls attend choir, right Madame?" He asked, to which Bedelia agreed with a tilt of her head.

He turned to look at Abigail once more. "In that case I don't see why you couldn't play the lead. Don't be foolish, child."

"But Monsieur… my voice couldn't do the role justice. I assure you, there are better choices to be had you just haven't heard…"

"Mademoiselle Hobbs, Are you questioning my judgement?" Chilton interrupted her, to which Abigail fell silent.

"No, no Monsieur…" she uttered after a long moment, timid. He persisted nonetheless.

"If you're so eager to doubt, tell me, who do you think should have this role?" Chilton questioned, and just before Abigail could speak up they were interrupted by a shouting voice.

It was one of the guards that Chilton had been afforded after his attack upon the stage. The man ran towards them, breathless and shaking in the knees. "Apologies for the interruption, I have an important message for you" the guard said as he struggled to catch his breath.

"Couldn't it wait?" Chilton scoffed, looking bothered. "I'm certain that the discussion you just interrupted is far more important than whatever it is you've come to say"

"I wouldn't be so quick to assume…" the guard replied, strangely unsettled and breathing heavily as he drew a letter from the inner lining of his coat. "This… this was given to me, for you."

The guard outstretched his arm to place the letter in Chilton's palm and Will watched as the blood drained from his face the moment he touched it. It was almost as if he'd seen a ghost, and Will's stirring anxiety from his intrigue to know more tipped towards amusement for an instance at the irony of that. The whole room fell silent, and Will ought to have known it then. If not by the deathly silence then by the tormented expression that overtook the man in front of him and made it appear as though that pristine white letter was a horror despite how truly unsuspecting it seemed. Not even Bedelia, who always maintained the coolest of expressions, could feign indifference now. Her eyes were wide with recognition.

"Who gave this to you?" Chilton gritted, voice sharp. It was as he raised the letter that Will noticed the red stamp pressed in its centre. A red stamp shaped in the perfect likeness of a blazing skull…

"It was given to me by a man who demanded that I bring it to you now, Monsieur. I couldn't see his face, for it was obscured by the shadow of a cloak…"

Will realised then, or perhaps he'd always known but wished to postpone the unsavoury truth further. Far, far away from the confines of his mind. Far enough that he wouldn't have to think of the implications of how all of this would surely lead back to him and how he'd likely let it happen as well. Chilton's breaths seemed to falter, fearful and rightfully so.

After all, he'd just been written to by the Phantom of the Opera…

Chapter End Notes

I will admit that I was somewhat indulgent in adding everything that's going on at the start... Then again, I couldn't help but argue that, hey, things are only going to get more intense in that regard and not even all that far from now. So hell why not?

As always, let me know what you think in the comments and if there's anything that I can improve!

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

In which the Phantom’s intentions are unveiled in ink, setting the stage for a pursuit of Will's own that masks a darker design...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To say that Frederick Chilton was infuriated by the contents of the letter was somewhat of an understatement.

Well, perhaps the word infuriated wasn't entirely fitting after all. Chilton's expression was something between anger and fear that Will couldn't quite place within those margins. It was clear that the man was trying to stifle his reactions out of pride, and even so, the emotion read clearly on his face in the way his jaw worked, teeth grinding, lips pressed taut. The way he held the squared paper between his fingers, almost trembling, knuckles bared and bleached pale white with the tension caused by the underlying bone. His upset was so terribly obvious that his efforts were useless. Will found that to be embarrassing, but then again, when was Chilton ever not?

Naturally a crowd had formed around him. The letter had stolen all of their attentions, violent as something imposed by force. *—Dreadfully similar to how the Phantom's voice had a way of lingering indeterminately like an echo in one's mind,* Will thought. Amidst the group's shared anticipation he stood close, drawn in by the mystery just as everybody else. Chilton revealed nothing. He spoke not a word for a long while as his eyes darted between written words and his jaw clenched even tighter, tense like a spring about to jolt forward in a biting snap.

Despite hoping to go unnoticed, Will couldn't help but lean in just a bit closer. Though he tried, he couldn't even hide his intentions from himself. In truth he wished to stand close enough so that he could read what the letter spoke of and marvel at the Phantom's words. To know his handwriting by sight alone and observe each detail that characterized it. The intent behind his phrases, the flick of his wrist and the curvature of the letters written at the angle of a quill once held by *his* hand. Skilled, delicate, *brutal* fingers wielding not the deadly weight of a reaper's scythe, but the lightness of a feather tipped in dark ink. Swirls of darkness, calligraphy over pale white stained and glinting similarly to blood under the moonlight and the manner in which Will had been slick with it… just below the moon, just nights before this and in the presence of *death himself*.

Oh, how strangely alluring of a thought that was… Will ought to have loathed himself for it.

A week it had been, and he couldn't even begin to understand why he was still so hopelessly intrigued, consumed, *obsessed*. He could understand it before, with the shock of it all, but everything that he'd been forced to endure that fateful night had faded into a low buzz of nerves that Will knew would always remain, for the experience had changed him after all. Still, his recollection of it felt as though reduced to mere fractured reflections of haunting memories he'd both lived and envisioned. All of it faint and dulled and *yet*, the Phantom's voice remained just as strongly in Will's mind as it had when he'd heard it the first time. It tainted each of his thoughts, each maddening reverie. Whispered devotions, melodic wants, demands, *desires*… None of it made him afraid, and Will wondered if it ever once had. He remained unanswered within the turbulence of his own thoughts.

"I see you too, Will" was where his mind often seemed to settle, turbulence turned to a sudden static at his core. Perhaps his subconscious was searching for *understanding* against any and all better judgement he had. And now, Will was being just as continuously unwise, *caught in his trap time and time again,* as he almost absently approached Chilton to get a better view of the letter and soon came to regret it. These past few weeks he seemed to have gained a habit of being noticed, after all.

He didn't need to wonder why that was.

The instance their eyes met was fleeting. He lowered his gaze in utmost avoidance upon realising the mistake he'd made and felt Chilton's glare burning holes through him regardless. Will lowered his eyes to rest over the letter in his hand instead, noting a tension so great in the way the edges crumpled that he was certain Chilton would rip the folded page to shreds any moment from now.

Skepticism ran thick as blood between the girls in the corps. Naturally impatient, each of them began to raise their voices in a persistent questioning. As inclined as they always had been to follow any hint of a rumour or a scandalous affair that there was, they were often left in the dark when it came to matters of importance. When it came down to it, they were unknowledgeable of what was truly going on between the walls they all shared.

"What does the letter say?" Spoke one of them. "Monsieur, what has been written?" Another asked. Many voices at once and simultaneously none at all, for the overlap made their words almost indistinguishable and as good as silence therefore. Will found that a few distinct words came into play then, always inevitable, *inescapable*, because in essence that is what *he* was.

"Could it be due to him? The Phantom of the Opera?"

Admittedly, Will was just as desperate to know as the rest. The few things that he knew differently to the other girls with regards to everything that had had happened up until then only made him all the more restless.

At some point into the quiet Will accepted that Chilton may not reveal what he'd read, and so he began to consider all of the possibilities in his mind. He knew that, in this letter, he might be *targeted*, as he now posed a threat that being the sole suspect of interest in Jack's investigation caused. After all, Will hadn't heard a word from the Phantom of the Opera since

he was first brought in for questioning. There had been nothing but silence beyond his conflicting thoughts and dreams…

Despite that consideration, it hardly made sense to Will, *because if so why retaliate now? And why like this?* After all, the man had expressed such adoration that night that it felt near impossible, unless Bedelia was right and getting too close would have him *killed*.

Would he be? *Killed in cold blood?* Will figured that if it were to happen, he'd be taken at the mercy of a blade and left similarly to Freddie Lounds. Then there'd be nobody willing to save him from that ill fate. Not even himself.

Will discarded that option in spite of his doubts, and as he continued to wonder a dangerous thought came to mind. What if, in this letter, he was to be sought after *further* than he had been on the night of the attack? *A pursuit for… understanding? Companionship? Or perhaps something more…*

Will's thoughts exalted every possibility, and he shivered like nothing else. The implications of it made his heart falter, despite the idea of being gauged alive in a similar ideal to Freddie Lounds having left him practically unfazed because to Will, that was an unlikely truth and a harsh possibility that he couldn't truly make himself believe in. But *this*. This was so much worse, for despite the silence he'd endured this past week having said otherwise, it meant that his own intrigue wasn't *unrequited* after all, and Will could believe in that, blindly even, and perhaps even follow through with whatever it might mean for them both,

And oh, how much more dangerous than a painful death that was…

There was no worse moment, it seemed, for Chilton to speak up than in the midst of Will's realisations — not that he had any way of knowing of that, of course. He was still quite shaken, eyes locked on Will's with considerable disdain. He appeared to be reviewing his options for what to do next, albeit more composed than he was before. He was forced to swallow his own offense and he did so visibly.

He smiled, erratically, falsely. His lips were stretched thin. "there will be another period of auditions to determine who is to perform the lead role in the upcoming Opera this evening." He cleared his throat. "I've come to realise that my methods for the selection weren't appropriate"

An admission of fault? From *Chilton?* In no way could these be words of his own. He couldn't even convince himself of the authenticity of what he was saying and his very visible reluctance in doing so made the attempt laughable. This time the room seemed to quiet down, and there was confusion amongst the girls more than anything else.

"Those of you who wish to partake in the auditions will sing tonight" Chilton concluded, presumably putting an end to his arguably strange and rather sudden announcement.

"But Monsieur" Bedelia reproached, coming to stand beside Chilton to voice her disapproval at once. "what of Mademoiselle Hobbs?"

"She may participate if she wishes to" Chilton stated simply. "But I can't promise that she'll have any luck in the matter, our dear writer here has implied a significant *interest* in one of her comrades" There was a certain bitterness in Chilton's tone. Will wondered if Chilton realised his mistake in including that mention, which confirmed that this decision wasn't his own.

Of course, it wasn't difficult to gather that anyway, but it only served as kindling for the fire of gossip and scandals within the corps. Will could almost sense the questions clouding each of the girls' minds. *Where does this new interest lie? What was so quick to change the stage manager's mind after he'd been so set on Abigail for the role?*

The question wasn't what, but *who*, and Will was frozen with anticipation, dread, hope, *fear*. Fear, because he was afraid of what he might come to know. Because deep down he knew he'd been correct and was only waiting for somebody to *say it.*

"Whatever could you mean?" Bedelia frowned with similar dread to Will's own. Perhaps she knew it as well, and denial was a welcome temptation for the both of them.

"*Will Graham* will be performing tonight. I believe he might earn our favour." Chilton announced, and beyond the shock that seized him, Will hadn't expected the revelation to feel so *wounding*. All of it because Chilton couldn't resist adding that flair of incredulity, the disbelief in his words just to state that *Will Graham could never be good enough to accomplish it by himself.*

Then again, *Chilton also couldn't help the fact that he had no other choice but to comply, so his opinions didn't matter anymore.*

Will almost smiled at that.

And now, Will knew that he had been right all along and it almost didn't feel like reality. His fate, *this pursuit,* was now decided. And as subtle as Chilton tried to be in saying it, it had practically been announced to the entire hall. He could feel the Phantom's influence even now and had not a clue about how he should feel with regards to it. It was chilling, the power he had over them all.

And so very riveting as well.

Madame du Maurier didn't seem to share that last sentiment. Her eyes were blown wide with bewilderment, mind working to see how she could impede what the Phantom had just caused.

"It is you who must make the decision regarding the lead." She began in a commanding tone. "Or do you not possess enough *competence* to lead with your own choices as the *manager* of the Opera Garnier?"

Chilton dismissed her words with another statement, though by the look in his eyes he'd certainly acknowledged what a blatant attack it was. "It has been decided." He said with a sense of resignation before turning to leave the theatre hall.

"By *who?"* Bedelia called out, this time louder, angrier, and Chilton paused once more. He let his mask of feigned indifference slip too soon it seemed, given that the moment he turned around to set eyes on his audience again he appeared agitated, uninhibited, spiteful as his lip twitched into a crooked grin. Perhaps he knew that alarming those who hadn't the faintest idea of what was happening was unwise, but he didn't care.

"The Phantom of the Opera."

***

Later that same day and against all hope for the contrary, Will found himself graced by Jack Crawford's presence sooner than he'd thought to expect.

Chilton must have been too distraught to think of subtleties, Will thought, for this time he hadn't taken the time to set up a meeting within the palais Garnier like he had previously, in a place discreet enough so that neither people or ghosts could sneak by to listen to whatever topic demanded such urgency. Instead, Chilton had opted to take Will further beyond the grand walls that enclosed them. The decision was driven by fear, no doubt, as it hadn't been very long after the chaos that ensued with the ill-received letter before Will was swept away in a carriage and taken to *commissary* of all places. In other words, taken straight to Jack Crawford, where he'd have to withstand accusations that would no doubt be aimed directly at him.

And so, Will sat still over a less-than-comfortable chair in what he assumed to be Jack's office, observing whatever trinket he could find over the worn wooden desk out of the boredom that his current predicament inspired. Even so, Will couldn't find it in himself to complain. He'd once thought that he may arrive to this destination under vastly different circumstances than a mere interrogation. It could have been an *arrest*, detainment on the grounds of *attempted murder.* In the very least he remained inside of an office and not a prison cell.

Will counted himself lucky. This didn't seem like an arrest, *or* an interrogation, at that. Will sat as he'd been ordered to, and he watched, subdued, as Chilton paced back and forth and voiced his every frustration over what had happened earlier in the morning for Jack to hear.

On the one hand, this postponed the merciless questioning Will expected to receive from Monsieur Crawford, but Chilton's ramblings really seemed to go on for an eternity. Spiteful remarks, strings of words that had become so recurring during the man's discourse that Will had practically learnt them all by heart. *'how can he have such nerve'* was the first to come to mind. *'he has no right to invalidate my power'* was said just as much. *"I will kill him myself once I get my hands on him"* was bold to both Will and the detective's surprise, but fatally unrealistic as well.

The endless descriptors were worth noting as well. Anything and everything from "hellish" to "deceitful" to "arrogant" and the list only seemed to go on, and on, and on…

Will had to admit that *"quantifiably bitchy"* wasn't exactly amongst the words that he'd expected. Sitting there was a bore nonetheless. Perhaps this was more similar to a counselling session than an interrogation, Will thought, except Jack didn't seem the type to have the patience necessary to withstand it.

Of course, he didn't. Not for very long. "Frederick" Jack warned, pinching the bridge of his nose with his index finger and his thumb. "Just bring me your findings"

That seemed to work in silencing Chilton, whose eyes were downturned to his shoes whilst he stood in the rare silence that followed the moment he'd decided to shut his mouth. He felt insulted no doubt, taking a rather loud breath before cautiously pulling the previously opened letter from the inside of his coat.

He set the letter on the table, and Will became so alert upon realising just how close it was that he practically jumped to lean forward and take a look. Jack swiped it off the gritty wooden surface faster than Will could get a glimpse of it, depriving his curious blue eyes and giving him a look tainted with cynicism instead.

"I was tempted to burn it" Chilton added, restless and spiteful with no way to exert whatever idea of personal justice he had. That was most definitely a good thing.

"It is fortunate that you did not" Jack said with audible disregard as he brought the letter closer to his face to inspect it. During the silence that the reading of the Phantom's letter required, Will has no choice but to observe his surroundings and hope to find interest elsewhere. The office looked well-lived in, and the showings of it were quite recent. Jack must have spent a few late nights working on this case as of recently, Will thought, and that certainly wasn't a good sign.

Will looked over at Jack once more with a sigh. The detective remained exactly as he'd seen him a long moment before. The same monotonous silence remained beyond the obnoxious sound of breathing, as did the same expectant stare from Chilton, from both Chilton and himself, Will realised, because he was just as eager to receive some kind of answer as he was. Will began to feel irritable as he wondered if this would ever end, but he had to admit that it was less about having to wait and more a consequence of the vexing knowledge that he was the only one left uninformed with regards to what the letter spoke of. That felt unfair, most of all.

When Jack pressed the letter onto the counter with no consideration for it, Will found that to be quite vexing as well. He ought to have been more careful with what could possibly be the only lead he'd have — though with what Will had come to understand of the Phantom's intentions he knew deep down that it wouldn't lead to anything of consequence at all. The Opera Ghost only revealed what he desired to be known.

And what he wished to be known today, apparently, was that Will held his *interest*...

Whatever psychological exertion the letter had supposed for Jack Crawford, it had him looking like he'd just heard the worst of jokes. Worse than Chilton's discourse even, and what a significant inconvenience it must have been to have such an effect on the man that had supposedly seen it all.

Of course, because one confrontation just wasn't enough, the first thing Jack said with regards to what he'd just read was unsurprisingly, "the boy must have written it"

Chilton let out a breathy chuckle then, placing a palm over the desk as he leant forward to direct himself at Jack "with all due respect detective, I'm not very much inclined to believe that *he* should possess the vocabulary necessary to write in such a manner"

Jack all but rolled his eyes. "The various testimonies that I have acquired from the other performers in his group tell me that he spends a considerable amount of his time in the Opera's library. He is well-read."

That was, perhaps, the only statement about himself that Will could deem accurate thus far. It was a pity that it was quite literally being used to build a case against him that consisted of more inaccuracies than truths.

And as relentless as he was, Jack continued to defend it. "Don't be fooled by the superfluous writing, Monsieur. Will Graham has motive enough to suggest that he wrote this as a diversion from the fact that he attempted to *kill* Freddie Lounds." He paused momentarily to meet Will's eyes. "He is hiding behind the identity of somebody that isn't real"

Chilton leaned closer, speaking in a hushed tone as though what he was saying was forbidden in some form. "But he *is* real. The Phantom of the Opera exists just as he did when he wrote to us all of those years ago. Letters just as this one, Jack, surely you must know what this means..."

Jack raised his voice then, and Will couldn't help but startle. "The killer that wrote to us then is dead just as that godforsaken name! You shall not usher it any longer so long as I may hear it."

It was curious, how Jack referred to him as the *"killer"* against any other common term, as if this was nothing but a mundane case of savagery, simple murders easily explained. Will came to understand that it was a denial of what Jack couldn't understand, because the element of the supernatural and unexplained frightened him, deep down.

"You don't know for sure that he is dead, the case has remained *unsolved* after all. You can't just discard the possibility that he may have returne-"

"I will not listen to this any longer!" Jack stood with the unpleasantly shrill drag of his chair. Chilton hurriedly shuffled through the pockets of his winter coat then. He pulled out what looked to be another letter, older, dark and dusted with age. Chilton unfolded it and placed it to rest beside the letter of the present day.

"Look" he said. "The writing is identical, without a fault." Chilton argued, And Jack's gaze shifted between the letters. The comparison was inarguable, and surely that left him more and more unsure of his previous statements. "As much as you may argue that the boy's penmanship might be formidable, he has never *seen* these letters before" Chilton added.

Jack frowned, moving to sit down again. "I find it difficult to believe that it is the same person who writes of such things" Jack reproached. "Beyond the obvious threats I couldn't

have ever imagined that this cold blooded killer might-"

Jack paused momentarily, as if suppressing a sense of revulsion working its way up. "What has been displayed here suggests a kind of *fondness* of which I'd never thought him capable…"

"An interest appropriate for a *love letter."* Chilton mused, seemingly content with himself and his observations. Will fought to keep himself from blushing at what was being said. He could feel his blood burning beneath his skin and prayed that he'd have the power to suppress it, and unable to resist his own curiosity anymore, he broke his own sworn silence at last.

"If you're no longer intent on proving my guilt, might I suggest that you let me read the letter before reaching your conclusions?"

Will was certain that he'd failed at holding off a blush as he spoke to them. Thankfully, both men were too preoccupied to either notice or care. Chilton and Jack shared a look of skepticism, but eventually, and much to Will's surprise, they complied with his request. Jack slid the page across the counter in Will's direction, and Will contemplated it for an instance before taking it in his hands.

It felt wrong to hold it in any way, knowing everything that it represented. Beyond the value it held in being what it was and having been written by who it had been, the aesthetic of it proved to be pleasing as well. Too pleasing for Will to so much as think of handling it with anything other than utmost care. The calligraphy was elegant, a symphony of words brought together in the most melodic of ways. Will had expected nothing less, but what these words described was something entirely apart.

Words proved to be tricky things more often than not. Will could rarely find those that could sufficiently describe how he felt. How he felt reading this was, for a start, *enamoured*. It was truly riveting, the way Will could sense the Phantom's essence through a means as simple as this. His darkness in the way threats were disguised by a thin veil of subtlety. Pleasantly eloquent but biting in a manner that had dread creeping through him slowly, gradually, like he was beginning to sink in the most gorgeous of still waters but wouldn't come to realise how grave it is to drown until it happened. Like he was bleeding to his own death, as he'd once envisioned, but could only consider each individual drop of blood without the slightest pain to be felt before everything subsided and turned to darkness, seduction, scarlet and warmth. It felt like being loved by death, and Will's breath caught in imagining what it would be like to love death back.

What surprised Will next was the Phantom's wit and obscure sense of humour that couldn't help but bring a smile to his face. It wasn't until Will tasted iron on his tongue that he realised that he had been biting the inside of his cheeks bloody in trying to hide his smile from Jack's scrutinizing gaze. Any hint of enjoyment would surely lead to his damnation, he thought, but he couldn't help himself when he had the pleasure of reading this…

Will wasn't sure at what point he had found himself unable to breathe. He felt a heat below his skin that rivalled the brightest of fires and knew he ought to have been flushing deep red for everyone in that room to see. Nothing that had been said previously could've possibly prepared him for what he was reading. Beyond knowing that he'd been mentioned and held

the Phantom of the Opera's interest, the manner in which it was expressed was downright *provoking*. It wasn't just intrigue being reciprocated, or value being shown, because what he was reading now suggested a kind of adoration that went beyond the sense of romance Chilton had joked about. It was dark, longing, obsessive, and just intricately worded enough that Will knew he was the only one that could understand all that it was. The true message behind this letter was meant for his eyes only, and it became the most intimate thing he'd ever read in turn. What was worse, is that Will felt all the more seen because of it. It was terrifying, and so very alluring as well…

Perhaps Will did know what it was like to be loved by death.

Jack cleared his throat rather loudly, causing Will to snap out of his thoughts and set the letter gently over the table with considerable reluctance. Will exhaled sharply, forcing himself to meet Jack's gaze. It didn't appear any less scrutinizing than before despite Will's innocence having been proven just minutes earlier. If anything, Jack appeared even more determined. Will wondered what for.

He eyed Will curiously, perplexed as though he was trying to decipher something through him. *Within him*. "What could he possibly see in you?"

Chilton spoke next, and it turned out to be one of those rare instances where despite normally spewing nonsense every time he opened his mouth, he was chillingly correct in saying something and just as much oblivious of that fact.

"Understanding. He wishes to be seen"

Jack turned to look at Chilton. "Why would he believe that this boy is capable of such understanding?"

"He has imagination. I'm willing to bet that the interest he raised suggests that he could very easily adopt the Phantom's mindset and make himself understand, if he so wished to."

Jack looked down at the letters in front of him, pensive as his eyes darted back and forth. He looked up at Will then, this time softer. The expression was unnatural on his visage.

"Will, may I *borrow* your imagination?"

Will was lost in his derealization, unknowing of the extent of what that implied and too caught up in his train of thought to even try to consider it. He simply nodded, and Jack hummed with satisfaction.

"You've met him before, The Phantom?" Jack inquired. Will noted the use of the Phantom's name for the first time on his lips. It was striking, and it suggested for the first time that Jack Crawford believed what he was being told. *Jack believed him.* Believed *in* him, in that he would be able to put an end to the mystery that haunted Jack so.

The pressure proved to be discomforting.

"I have not" Will muttered, quiet but clear despite knowing just how much of a lie it was. Lying was becoming easier for him, it seemed. He didn't want it to appear like he'd gotten too close already. Like they had a pre-existing rapport and Will had aided the Phantom of the Opera in his crimes…

"Then you will" Jack stood up, sounding both commanding and stricken by the dread of the Phantom's return. He was unwavering still, of course. "You will do everything in your power to get close to him, within reason."

Will looked up at Jack, still endlessly lost and so very confused that he would so suddenly wish for Will to get close to the Phantom. Didn't he know how *dangerous* that was? Shouldn't he have followed his better judgement and realised that Will could become a victim of all of this? Or worse, an *accomplice?* They had just established that he was capable of understanding him, after all, so why was Jack so seemingly *accepting* of it? Upon noticing his questioning gaze, Jack became set on proving reassurance.

"The Phantom of the Opera came back from hiding after twelve years only to avenge you by almost *killing* Freddie Lounds. And now, realising that I suspected you of the crime, he wrote us a letter to counteract that." He paused, only to speak even louder.

"For god's sake, Will, he all but demanded that you play a lead role to ensure your success. He is *devoted* to you."

Will knew that. He *knew,* and part of him wondered when he'd wake up and realise that all of this was a twisted fantasy, a dream and nothing more. In truth, the only thing that worried him was that he might get too close, dancing along the precipice towards a maddening descent into darkness and a temptation for *more, so much more...* Only god knows what would happen after that if Will were to reach that point.

"You won't be hurt, I won't allow him the chance to." Jack assured, and Will sighed. He could feel himself giving in despite his concerns. It wasn't like he could help them, and if he could, Will wasn't even sure if he'd want that after all.

"what do you want me to do?"

"The Phantom of the Opera wants something from you*,* that much is clear" Jack said, and Will shivered at the affirmation being spoken out loud. "You're going to use that to your own benefit, and then," Jack paused, and he *smiled*.

And then?

"then, you are going to help me catch him."

Chapter End Notes

I'm sooo positively hyped in reaching what is pretty much the beginning of a very important milestone in this story. In other words, things should start to get exciting! ...and I have a feeling that Will just might encounter the Phantom of the Opera again... 👀

I really hope that you enjoy reading this as much as I enjoy writing it, and as always, let me know in the comments what you think and if there's anything that I can improve! :)

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

In which passion and obsession blur the lines of intent, and future pursuits are laced with motives yet unknown...

Deep within the lowest levels of the Opera Garnier, flickers of candlelight illuminated the inner structures of the building and carved immense arches out from the darkness by which they were obscured. The shadows casted by the warm light passed quickly, fading with the sound of hollow footsteps that resounded throughout the maze of cold stone.

The catacombs of the Palais Garnier were a place that very few knew of. The dark side of a crescent moon, unseen and untouched by the light so seemingly close to it. It was very unlikely for anyone to dare to descend to those levels, and even less likely for them to be cunning enough to find them in the first place.

If they did however, they could never be sure if they were the only ones there or if the catacombs harboured a dark secret within them. It was chilling, how the faintest of sounds seemed to reverberate. The passing of obscure waters from the lake in the canal, the stray gusts of wind, and perhaps, if not a madness created by the fear in one's mind, the haunting whispers of a *ghost*…

Bedelia du Maurier walked through the most challenging of the dark passages carefully, candle held firmly in her hand. The smell of humidity and dust felt increasingly heavy on her lungs. The ambience of the place, heavy on her heart. All of it proved to be disorienting, but even so, Bedelia persevered. She had been down there before after all, so it wasn't very long before she found her way at last.

Being able to stand upright after crouching through the narrowest of spaces was a relief in itself. Upon turning a corner, Bedelia was met with a broad reception. The sudden brightness and warmth of the scattered candlelight almost blinded her senses after having been accustomed to venturing in the dark for so long. Dozens of small flames glimmered across stone walls, bright around the area that she knew to be the Phantom's lair. Subtle notes of aromatic scents intensified as she came towards the centre of the room. The burn of incense, firewood, hints of lavender and smoke.

In truth, the place was opulent. Its bearings built from tall arches, pointed as a blade facing up to greet the unloving gods. The polished stone walls met by those very arches were exceedingly tall and of considerable grandeur. Every alcove and protrusion that graced them was strategic, made to accommodate lavish furniture by design. The array of columns spread across the room reminded of those of a Corinthian craft, their engravings much alike. Beyond

the cold stone however, the floors were pleasantly plated with oakwood and the blaring fireplace was adorned with the antlers of a stag.

Despite what the monumental structure alone suggested, the intricate furnishing and decor gave the room a more lived in appearance. Various armchairs, cultural artifacts and animal furs. The candles as a source of light, gold accents engraved across every surface to reflect it. The colour scheme was deliberate, one of deep reds and stormy blues. All of it so devilishly *him,* unmistakable in style and essence.

It was very clear that this served as a home to the Phantom, and if not for its unfortunate placement in the depths of the catacombs it would have almost possessed an equal prestige to the Opera House that stood just metres above it. The lair was the only place in the entire underground floor to have been expertly refurbished. Presumably, by the Phantom himself. Given that he was viewed as a mere legend by most and by others as a serial murderer, the combination of rather unfortunate circumstances made for foreign services to be complicated. Regardless, his skillset made the first idea more than believable. His many talents were as uncanny as the man himself.

Bedelia turned towards the wall to her left. It looked the brightest, as there was an especially extensive array of tall beeswax candles placed over the countertop in front of it. Just above the candles there was a large mirror with a gold-embellished frame. A mantel was draped almost entirely over the reflective surface, and Bedelia felt an ache in her heart for she knew precisely why that was.

The feeling was faint. For a moment she recalled how differently she had once felt. Once many years ago, when her sympathy for the Opera Ghost had surpassed her fear of him.

That was far from the case now.

She thought it wise to pause where she stood, afraid to pose any more of an intrusion. There was an alcove not too far in front of her, and in front of it, an organ. The instrument wasn't being played, but beyond the shadow casted by its tall frame she could clearly make out the Phantom's devilish silhouette sitting directly before it.

Eyes fixed on a face that she could hardly see, Bedelia swallowed hard. She could feel her own fear creeping its way up her throat and it almost felt like the grasp of a claw around her neck, tearing sharply, *mercilessly*, through the flesh and bone. She knew it was a fear that she'd never surpass, because after all this time she still hadn't surpassed it despite having known him for so long. If anything, the time spent made it worse.

Bedelia suppressed the feeling. "I've come to speak with you" she called, firm and practiced.

Beyond the shadow casted by his instrument, Bedelia could've sworn that she saw the Phantom smile. A quick flash of teeth, pointed and sharp like that of a devil. His apparent amusement only worsened the sense of dread that she felt.

"And to what do I owe this rare visit?" The man inquired. "Though you did come without notice, it would be rude of me to turn down a guest"

"—Especially one as engaging in conversation as yourself" he added, for the devil had a silver tongue. She said nothing of it.

For an instance, she noted his charm. The pleasant tone of his voice, and his words, so perfectly crafted. Rather than observe, she remembered, and with that came the reminder of just how dangerously alluring he was. How enchanting she had once found him, *how intriguing she still found him now*. The reminder redirected her to the motive of her visit, and she grounded herself.

"I've come to speak of Will Graham" She looked ahead and noted the shift in his position. The Phantom seemed to tilt forward with a newfound interest, allowing for the opposing candlelight to illuminate some of his features as it flickered across his face. Copper hues over a faceted darkness, his irises lit up.

Against the warm light, his eyes burned with delight and were something close to hellfire. They almost appeared to be glowing a deep red, of a colour richer than wine or blood. His gaze persisted, and the dark energy that he never ceased to possess seemed to suck all of the air out of the room.

"The choir boy that is set to play the lead role in the upcoming Opera" the man chimed with an upturned quirk of his lip, one half of his face still obscured.

There were many things that Bedelia could have said to that. Witty mentions, willful observations on how the boy was not only *set* to perform as such, but elevated to that position by the Phantom himself. She could've noted how full of praise the Phantom was by his tone alone, or even how alarmingly *eager* Will Graham had seemed after witnessing something that was nothing short of *monstrous* the week before. Despite all of the things that she wished to speak of, *know more of*, she asked the question that almost seemed to encompass it all.

"What is he to you?" A prodding inquiry, only then followed by a biting remark. "Another toy that you're determined to *break?"*

Bedelia hardly worked to hide her disdain. She could feel her nerves firing as she endured the contemplative silence her words had earned her. Perhaps she had been too daring, but in the very least the limits she'd pushed were softened by his positive mood.

"I am simply getting to know him." The Phantom spoke then, calm but unreadable. The ambiguity of his emotions was often a danger, but in the very least he seemed to draw amusement from her concerns. "I'm intrigued"

"Obsessively" Bedelia drawled. Wide-eyed, She didn't cease to maintain her glare despite the unsettlement that looking into his eyes brought. A part of her could recognise that there was something so scarily… *enthralling*, about knowing the threat he may suppose.

The Phantom paid no mind to her statement. "He is hardly a toy." he remarked, this time more serious. "I believe you'll find that Will Graham will prove to be so much more than that, tonight."

There was no missing the adoration in his tone, the divination in the sparkle of his eyes... It would take a fool to mistake it. Bedelia sighed, her exasperation reaching new lengths.

"Hannibal" she warned, his name an echo that should've never once been spoken. "You're making a mistake in pursuing him."

There was silence once more.

What came next was a hardly veiled warning of his own. "The mistake is *yours*, if you wish to impede me."

"No. *No*, of course not." Bedelia corrected herself, now cautious. She knew that she was treading a thin line. One that would've already been crossed, if she didn't still hold some of his affections.

Perhaps those affections were beginning to shift.

"All I meant to say is that-" for an instance, the scarlet glow of his eyes made her breath catch. "… the value that you see in him, it may not lead to the results you wish to obtain"

Silence. Bedelia felt the need to fill it with words.

"He is vulnerable, *naive*. As receptive as he may appear now he will only try to escape you once you reveal your true nature to him, Hannibal"

He hardly considered her words. "Our very meeting was built upon that nature. I believe it is a nature we might one day share, as one."

Those words proved to be deeply unsettling to Bedelia. To her, the very concept of it seemed as though sourced in the depths of complete *delusion*. Will Graham, though perhaps not what he seemed, wasn't a *killer*. He was simply lost, unwise in where his intrigues lead him and too young to understand the destruction that they might suppose…

"He is a *child*. A curious one at that, but his curiosity will not last long" she said finally.

The Phantom smiled once more, a wicked gesture for what was to come. "He is no more a child than we were when our paths crossed. Wouldn't you say that you felt rather differently about me then, Bedelia?"

Her throat tightened at the insinuation, and this time, the silence was hers.

"Tell me Bedelia, are you worried this might become infatuation?"

It felt cruel, the demand for an answer when it was so needless to even consider otherwise.

"It already has" she uttered, only she was unsure if she spoke of an infatuation that was his and the boy's or, long before, *hers*.

***

By the time Will was escorted back to the Opera Garnier it was sometime in the late evening, and what was approximately a thirty minute ride by carriage had felt like hours in the dark. During his return, Will had looked over his shoulder at the streets obscured by nightlight and reminisced about all that was happening in his life. Or rather what had yet to happen, as though he were peeking through the petals of a flower not yet in bloom.

Absently, he had acknowledged the clicking of horseshoes over cobblestones and the sway of the carriage beneath him at a rhythm close to that of the horse leading the way. The breeze blowing through his hair, a movement of cool air that seemed to slow with his thoughts just as everything else in Will's environment. They had passed small but bright lights that illuminated distant house windows, a necessity at that hour as the sun dawned early during the winter times.

In the present it all seemed like a haze, but Will had thought about many things during this voyage of sorts. Things like the dread of having to face the girls in the corps de ballet, or just *anyone* really, after seeing the uproar that the letter had caused. He'd thought about the simmering anxiety he felt at having to perform for all of them in short, and inevitably, about what he had finally gotten to read with regards to himself.

Jack Crawford's words had come to mind as well. Specifically, how he had told Will to get close to the Phantom and do whatever it takes to achieve it. Somehow the limitlessness of *'whatever it takes'* seemed to linger in Will's mind with an unmistakably *riveting* sense of the forbidden. The unnamed possibilities caused a unexplainable stir inside of him that Will dreaded to think of as what it was; a strangely foreboding *desire.* Perhaps temptation was a better word for it. Regardless of the terminology, Will couldn't help but feel guilt like nothing else.

Another thing that seemed to linger was the image of Freddie Lounds that had surfaced his thoughts then as well. Ever since the night that it happened, the look of terror on her paling face had been engraved behind Will's eyes as though she was staring back at him. Regardless of him being asleep or lucid, eyes open or closed.

With that reminder of her fate, Will knew he'd be doing right by helping Jack catch the killer. Worded as the *Killer*, because using that term provided Will with more clarity than the names he couldn't help but dizzy himself with before. *Was it the Phantom of the Opera? Or rather his Angel of music and his Angel of death?*

All of them felt so dauntingly intimate.

There was a kind of strangeness to it. Will *knew*, *undeniably so,* that he'd be doing right by helping Jack put an end to his *(The Man's? Angel's? Ghost's?)* actions. It was so very clearly that he knew, and *yet*, he felt conflicted whilst he recalled what the Phantom had written about him — *for him.* Will couldn't help but feel a curious spark within himself whilst he recalled all that the Phantom had said those many nights ago…

"I see you too, Will"

The abrupt pause of the carriage was what had alerted Will of his arrival to the Palais Garnier, though he soon realised that he wasn't sure how long it truly had been since they'd

stopped. He remained in a trance-like state as he looked up at the grand entrance for the monumental building in front of him, not yet caught up with reality and nowhere close to even thinking of stepping out.

It was a voice calling his name, what snapped Will out of it definitively. Upon looking around himself he finally took notice of Chilton standing in front of him, hand held out to help him out of the carriage.

He didn't take his hand, instead stepping down without the help out of a reluctance to accept it. Past his look of indignity, Chilton brushed his hand over his coat in an attempt to play the gesture off and said not a word. He soon followed behind Will, who had trailed off alone and without warning.

They soon parted ways. Will reached the auditorium and was relieved to find that there was nobody there except himself. He assumed that everyone was still at dinner, making his way over to the floor seats on the ground level of the theatre hall. Walking through the small passage that separated the seats in the floor's centre, Will dragged his hands over the backrests of those on both sides of himself. Eyes closed, his fingertips dragged pleasantly over the velvet cushioning. Beyond the silence brought by vacancy, all that could be heard was the soft patter of his own footsteps as he neared the base of the stage.

There came a point where Will opened his eyes and found that he had stopped in front of it, only his attention wasn't directed to the stage itself but to the area just below it. For an instance he thought of how it was where Chilton had been attacked just moments before Freddie Lounds had been savaged in front of him. Involuntary revenge, gift-wrapped, almost.

Admittedly, and ignoring the gruesome nature of that last thought, Will felt an edge of amusement in thinking of the manner in which Chilton must have fallen to acquire his neck injury. Surely, his impact against the floor had been amusing. With a quiet chuckle, Will opted to climb onto the stage to reimagine it further. A strange pleasure it was, undoubtedly inspired by Will's anxious restlessness preceding the audition he was being forced to do.

He managed to climb onto the stage with an easeful leap, his first steps unsteady before he regained his balance and stood perfectly upright once more. He kicked off his shoes to walk the stage barefoot and neared the blaring spotlight, taking a moment to bask beneath it with his eyes closed.

He imagined, with the faintest spark of bitterness, the damning conversation that was surely had between Freddie Lounds and Monsieur Chilton over that stage a week prior. There on the night that defined all that was now, when Will had stormed out following their conflict and the other girls had abandoned their practice shortly after to rest for the night. There hadn't been anyone there to bear witness. Nothing beyond Chilton's vague public testament and Will's uncanny daydreams that were, so far, scarily close to being visionary truths.

As he watched them in his mind, Will could practically hear the words that were being spoken. Insults. Insults on her part. Negotiations on another, and a clear agreement on behalf of those insults more than the negotiation itself. For a moment they laughed, and even in Will's imagination it was grating. He couldn't help but sigh. It was all so incomparably obnoxious and he felt irritated by just the mere vision of it all.

Thankfully the turn of events he'd been hoping for took place then. He saw a cloaked figure advance towards the pair. At the same time, in that figure, Will saw himself. Vaguely, he felt his own feet shuffling over the stage and wondered if he was experiencing this as the Phantom or, rather passively, as himself. *Perpetrator or a mere witness?* Will was unsure. All of this felt like a crime of his own in some sense, and that was both a curse and a blessing.

Freddie was the first to scream at the sight of the Phantom, but he turned to approach Chilton first. A blow to his jaw left the man staggering, and it was a second one to the nose that caused his fall from the heights of the stage. A heavy thud. It was a pity that Chilton had fallen unconscious before he could feel the pain of the impact.

Will returned to himself for an instance, just aware enough. He felt more openly sadistic now than he could've ever dreamed of being in the past, and that scared him somewhat. It was just as though he was truly *adopting* the traits of a sick mind after all. One that just so happened to be… *divine*, in spite of its madness.

He was unsure if sharing the mindset of a killer would be an asset or an issue further into the future, but as always what damned him was his curiosity to learn *more*. All he knew was that right now he felt righteous in watching the twisted, broken man below him. And, strangely, it was enough.

Predatorial, Will saw Freddie behind his eyes and she was panicked. The flash of her silhouette warned his keen eyes of her attempt at an escape. She began to run towards the backstage, and Will watched the cloaked figure chase after her. Of course, Will already knew of her fate from what he'd witnessed over the staircase, but he was caught in the vision regardless. He felt his body's impulse as though it was him chasing her and not the illusion of the other man. It was strange, how in his mind their identities seemed to blur. It was as though his sense of self had surrendered to something greater. *Seduced and taken by the voice of the Angel of music once and for all…*

"I hope I'm not interrupting your practice"

Will startled, realising that he had been in movement after all. His steps slowed abruptly and he turned to face the voice that called to him. The realisation of who it was suddenly seemed more daunting than the scare of the moment before.

"Alana." He acknowledged her, both the discomfort and surprise of the encounter clear by his tone.

As expected, he was lost for words and unsure as to how to move forward. Winding up alone with Alana Bloom in the auditorium was the least of his predictions. There was a certain humour to it*, for had she not been avoiding him?*

"I wasn't aware that we were on speaking terms now"

The words escaped Will, and the harshness of his tone was a surprise to them both. He hoped to soften it with an explanation, but an explanatory reminder of the fact that he'd told Jack that he'd gone to find Alana in her boudoir the night of the attack wasn't ideal. It was obvious beyond words to them both that this was the cause of her avoidance.

"What are you doing here?" He asked, this time softer.

"Well" she began, unwavering despite the previous remark. She abandoned the corner he'd spotted her in to instead approach the centre of the stage where he remained still.

She paused at an arm's length, smile coy. "I must admit that my hopes were to find you here, alone."

Will watched her, lowering his head in an apprehensive nod once looking into her eyes felt like too much to bear. After all, he had evaded them for quite some time. Her gaze alone felt strangely foreign to him all of a sudden. In it he sensed a difference in intent, *but what for?*

"I don't think we've ever lingered in a room together, *alone*." Pensive as always, he smiled. It was ironic. "At one point I began to suspect that you did it purposefully."

"I thought it wise" he was quick to add just before she could give her false denial in response to spare his feelings. "I'm the only boy in the corps de ballet, under *your* tutelage."

Always an outcast, he thought, and he smiled to himself. Sarcastic, half-embarrassed, but he still seemed to find comfort in her at least. Familiarity beyond the ominous dark.

He spoke again, stupidly, in excess. "Naturally anyone who doesn't assume me to be *queer* thinks I'm having an affair with my ballet instructor"

Despite the impersonal effort he'd made in not saying her name, it was strange to acknowledge it out loud. Because it was no lie they did in fact believe him to be having an affair with Alana Bloom, and he knew exactly how she felt about it.

Or at least he had… *but she was here now.* They were alone, and she was at his side breaking her silence regardless of rumours and past events.

A part of Will wanted to ask why she'd come, but ultimately he decided against it. It would've begun to feel too much like an interrogation. He didn't wish to interrogate her, he had had enough interrogations of his own this past week alone.

"Are you nervous about your performance?" She prompted, silence too much to bear. Just the look in his eyes was enough of a response it seemed. Unsurprising of course, as she had always been so positively perceptive.

"You shouldn't be, nervous." She reasoned. Perfectly sincere, considerate. "It is clear that you'll play the lead regardless of the outcome. They must like you, whoever wrote that letter on your behalf"

Alana's words caught his attention and his next inquiry was one of genuine disbelief. "You don't think it was the Phantom?"

"No." she smiled, humoured. "There is no Phantom of the Opera, but there's no doubt that it was someone who knew of the letters that were written in the past"

Will considered her words. "Did *you?"*

"Yes."

He turned her words over in his mind. *That* was a strange implication. Perhaps he'd been subconsciously seeking it out by asking the things he had. It likely meant nothing. Coincidence, nothing more.

"Then what do you make of it?" He asked regardless of his dubious path in questioning. It seemed that whenever he touched this topic he had no way of moving on.

Out of interest, he searched for answers through her eyes and found reflections of his own ruinous hopes instead. It was a dangerous game. Eyes were often distracting. Feelings, even more so. A moment into the quiet, Alana spoke.

"I believe this person is trying to reach out to you, through a silence that they thought they couldn't otherwise surpass through spoken words"

"—Until now." She added. Strangely particular. *Deliberate*. *What did she intend?*

"They broke their silence?"

"They did."

Will's confusion was greater now. Brow furrowed, he asked. "Why did you come, Alana?"

"I am simply here to support a friend" She placed a hand on Will's shoulder and he fought to not fluster at the contact. It was unexpected somehow. He contained his sharp breaths whilst she spoke in close proximity. "You will do well, I'm sure of it"

"What if I *don't?"* Will questioned, his eyes to the floors. In saying it he suddenly realised the extent of his doubts. The sheer devastation at the very thought that all of this could go so terribly wrong. Proving this to everyone, to *himself*, was more important to him than what he'd initially thought. This was *everything* right now.

She ran her hand over his back, a soothing motion. He sighed into it.

"Don't be foolish" she spoke just under her breath, ever-comforting. "you'll do wonderfully and prove to be everything I know is true"

He couldn't help but smile at her assurance, though his gaze was still downturned. He felt Alana at a near distance, closer than she had been before. The hand that wasn't cradling him reached across to cup Will's face. There, it settled before gently coaxing him to look up and meet her eyes with a seamless tilt.

Will felt pliant, like molten glass. Treated with care and caution either because of the damage the scorching heat might cause or because of the ill-thought belief that, even in this state, he could still fracture and break apart.

Broken glass, shattered by the lightest touch. Perhaps *that* was what Alana saw in him. Fragility, something she needed to fix, hold together, *protect*. When the Phantom had held him just as she did now, it had been anything but. He had been unhesitating, *daring.* He had

recognised not fragility, but *danger* and *darkness*, and he had held it in his hands still and without the slightest doubt. Will was not only cradled, but *seen and embraced.* Because the Phantom had seen not shards of glass, but burning flames to which he'd proclaimed himself to in *hopes* of meeting their wrath.

…But he was a *murderer*. Surely no true care could come from that.

Will was unsure which vision of him was to be true, *fragility or destruction?* His doubts quieted for an instance, however, when he met Alana's gaze. He saw her, kind, smiling. Safe, just as she always had been. He felt inclined to lean into her comfort. As they remained now, he was lost to her. Lost for words. Lost to his own senses, to his every waking thought…

The feeling was awfully familiar. And, at least in recent days... Not due to the thought of *her*.

Will startled at the slam of a door behind them in the backstage, followed by the chatter of girlish voices which lead to the realisation of the corps girls' return. Will was quick to become alert by that, and because of it, concerned. He hadn't thought to pull away, and perhaps, somehow, it hadn't occurred to Alana either.

It wasn't until he spoke that he noticed his shortness of breath. The acknowledgement only made it worse. "Alana, perhaps we should... They might believe that-"

A pointless sentence not even worth finishing, for by the time he'd said it the girls were already rushing onto the stage. Will could feel himself blush and the heat that it caused. It was unfortunate, the assumption that could be made from how they now stood — not that it hadn't been made already, of course. Strangely enough, Alana didn't seem to give into worry or consideration. She hardly spared them a glance. She was entirely focused on Will, even now.

"Good luck" she said, and for an instance Will was confused by her words. He had stupidly forgotten all about his performance in the midst of whatever this was. Alana brushed a thumb over the side of his face, and Will felt his breath catch when she leant forward and pressed a chaste kiss to his cheek. It was abrupt. Everything had felt so terribly abrupt following the precise moment when Will had been avenged through the spilling of blood.

Alana pulled back and stepped away to join the circle that had formed around him. There Will stood, alone, dead centre of a bustling crowd of curious, prying eyes. He suddenly felt like he was bearing the dread of many lifetimes,

As what he was about to do next would likely define what this one might hold.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

In which Will's voice soars with a plea for remembrance to the distant shadows. A calling to he who lingers in the dark...

Moments into being exposed to the attentions of the many people that watched him, Will considered that perhaps he wasn't suited to perform.

He stumbled forward, vaguely noting a piano's distant off-keys and the whispers of those around him. Will wasn't sure at which point he'd started to feel lightheaded. He had so suddenly become aware of the crowd that surrounded him, — suddenly aware of their expectations, the scrutiny he'd face if he didn't fulfill them all. Will had been given an opportunity. He was finally in a position to be recognised for his worth like never before, and yet it felt so overwhelmingly… *different*, to what he'd always imagined.

He couldn't do this… he couldn't.

Will had dreamt of recognition, a spotlight to revel in. Now that he'd come so terribly close to having it, he felt nothing but nerves and a fear of failure that he had never before contemplated from the safety of his imagination. Reality, as cruel as it often was, left Will to feel as though he was being circled by vultures. He braced himself not for success, but for butchery. As irrational as it was he feared to soon be torn apart.

Perhaps the Opera ghost would fulfill those beliefs, if Will wasn't good enough.

Will squinted as he looked up. The spotlight he'd previously basked in while alone now pained his eyes. Cold and unfeeling, it only served to draw more attention to him. It burned through his irises in a blinding haze of white, and Will wanted nothing more than to retreat to the shadows and hide from it all.

He could feel the heavy pulse of his heartbeat. It thrummed, erratic, like a fluttering bird caged inside of his throat. With it he had no way of speaking, surely not. The simple act of breathing seemed to be causing him to drown. Like blood pouring down his airway, though his throat was not yet cut. Will's mouth was dry, voice likely broken. He wouldn't speak, wouldn't sing, he *couldn't*.

He couldn't.

Will was almost certain that he was being spoken to. —Or perhaps what he heard were the starting notes of his aria, he couldn't tell. He heard not melodies to give himself to in song, but a shrill and monotonous sound that pierced through his ears like a double pointed sword.

Through it Will couldn't distinguish a single word or musical note, murmur or flourish. There was nothing but that dreadful noise to fill his ears.

The noise increased as did his desperate breaths. His focus on breathing wouldn't allow him to try to keep his composure. He feared he might asphyxiate. He'd truly begun to panic, Will realised. *Could the others see the extent of his distress?* He was familiar with them all, the girls in the corps de ballet, and yet he couldn't distinguish a single face amongst the many.

All of them seemed to blur, ghoulishly pale due to the imposing spotlight. A fog of absent features, strangers, *ghosts*. His surroundings started to spin around him, and this only disoriented Will further. He closed his eyes, praying for this feeling to pass while fearing that it never would.

Will found that with his eyes closed the painfully bright lights didn't blind him as much as they had before. It was a small relief, but as small as it was it couldn't possibly slow the growing turbulence inside of him. Anxiety continued to tighten its grasp around Will, and as much as he tried he couldn't catch his breath. Vaguely, he heard a voice behind him. It was distinct, and he could've sworn to have heard it calling his name. There, somewhere near and far around him.

"Will! ...Will? Over here! Will!"

Immediately following the voice he'd heard, Will was pulled back, stumbling away from his audience before he could so much as open his eyes to find out who had called. He didn't need to now, of course. It was Beverly. She had dragged him into the backstage at the expense of his shirt collar, which had stretched as a consequence of her hold.

Will paid little mind to it. He was grateful for the dim lighting of the backstage storage room. There, he quickly retreated to the far side of the room to rest and calm himself. The brief moment of respite truly was a relief. He was still shaking, skin crawling with the buzz of lingering nerves. He practically fell to the floor to lean against one of the costume racks, breathing out raggedly.

Will looked up then, vision still hazy but a vast improvement to before.

"Beverly…" he squinted. She stood across from him, pacing as she looked through to the opposing halls to ensure that none of the others had followed behind, be it out of curiosity or concern.

"I do expect you to explain what that was, but it'll have to wait." She turned to look at him then, seemingly content in having seen to it that they were alone. "There are other more urgent matters that we must discuss."

Will frowned. He threw his head back in apathy, causing the clothing rack to shift. "Please do spare me of your unrelenting affinity for *gossip*" he protested, noting the instability of his voice and choosing to speak regardless. "it is *very* annoying"

A smile pulled at the corner of Beverly's mouth, both surprised and, oddly enough, impressed. Humoured. *Had he said something pleasant?* It seemed she was quite fond of

Will, grumbling and all. "Trust me, this is of interest to you too."

It likely wasn't. Regardless, all Will could think about was his failure to perform moments before. The reality of it dawned on him slowly, like a rising tide. He couldn't fathom what all of them must have thought, *what the Phantom of the Opera must have thought…*

What would become of Will now?

Will remained silent as he was, which he soon realised wasn't an explicit denial when Beverly didn't spare so much as an instance before she began to hassle him once more. He had barely begun to catch his breath and he was being subjected to questioning just as he so often had been in recent weeks. He sighed, discouraged.

"I had wished to discuss what we were told of the Phantom's letter with you this morning, but you were taken away so fast," Beverly explained. "Monsieur Chilton said that it spoke of you, as you too know, so I must ask…"

Will kept his eyes on the ceiling above him. Whatever she meant to ask, he wouldn't likely be inclined to give an answer, *for what scandal would be made of him next?* He was prepared for anything. Any manner of a question, surging rumours, opportunities likely crushed. *Possibilities,* because *Will may well be murdered at the hands of the very thing that intrigued him like nothing else…*

Will buried his head in his hands at the thought. It was only for an instance, for he quickly remembered to not raise concern. He hated only being regarded for his hardships; for pity's sake alone.

"Have you *seen* the Phantom of the Opera?" Beverly asked. In her eyes he recognised an innate curiosity. Then a subtle sense of awe and fear at the notion, which undoubtedly inspired respect.

Will said nothing. It wasn't that the question had been unexpected, others had claimed time and time again to have spotted the Opera ghost. Many were eager to speak of all that they'd witnessed, but none of their descriptions ever aligned. In every iteration, regardless, his appearance was said to be terrifying. Described as a devil, a skeleton and at times a headless man…

"You seemed to struggle to deny having met someone else when I asked you." Beverly prompted faced with his silence. "Have you been meeting with the *Phantom* all along?"

Will snorted. He levelled his head to look at her, in his eyes a hint of disinhibition, *une vrai folie*. He smiled just a bit, so lost in this awful sense of impending doom that he couldn't help but treat his words, *(perhaps his last words…)* with humour. The tone of his voice suggested something entirely other once he spoke, he could feel the irony of it burning on his tongue.

"There is no Phantom of the Opera."

Beverly leant back, her own smile tipped faintly downwards at such jarring words being spoken. She wasn't content with his answer, that much was clear. Too many things had gone

unexplained in the Opera Garnier for the cause to have been anything other. She was skeptical of him no doubt. She knew, they knew it *both*, that there existed a ghost of the Opera.

"You don't believe the words of your own mouth" She remarked, a mere observation. "Tell me the truth"

Will smiled, humoured beyond his growing agitation. He tried his best to keep it concealed. "Even if he does exist, I can't say that I've made his acquaintance…" he lied. *He had every reason to lie.*

Will wished of his lies to become truths, so that none of this would matter. So that Will wouldn't have been *seen* as he was and then given the chance to disappoint as he just had. He had been so *foolish*. Will felt, in a word, *heartbroken*. Heartbroken to have ruined his chances for himself, and beyond that, his reputation. *What was worse, to be a failure or rather to be nothing at all?* Will found that he preferred his past near-invisibility. He could feel the knot in the back of his throat returning at the aid of his self-inflicted reminders. Tears threatened to sting his eyes, and that only humiliated Will further.

"Perhaps you deny this just as you denied your involvement with Alana Bloom" Beverly remarked, neutral in demeanor but aware of what pointed words they were. "All of us saw you out there earlier this evening."

It was a stinging accusation, and yet it hardly mattered to Will as he currently was. He was lost to other thoughts right now. Rather than what was being said, it was how helpless and exposed Will felt, what hurt him. He couldn't stand to be picked apart right now. Not like this. Will shifted to wrap his arms around himself, tightening his fingers painfully around his sides so that his hands wouldn't begin to shake as they had before. He looked away completely when he felt his eyes burning with tears that threatened to fall. He was ashamed to be seen this way by anyone.

"Beverly, *please*." He let out a sharp breath, quiet and relenting. He wasn't sure what he was pleading for. He only hoped to disappear and be left and forgotten at once.

"Okay." She said, voice softer all of a sudden. She squatted so that the were of a similar height whilst he sat and put her hands over his shoulders. "Will, you need to calm down"

Will gave a strained chuckle, avoiding her gaze still. "Do I?"

She smiled, though it was now with worry and not out of humour to accompany an innocent quip. She pitied him now, *of course.* Beyond that, she couldn't have truly cared.

"Come with me" She said then, taking Will gently by the hands. He remained for a moment before allowing himself the help to be lifted on his feet. He was careful in breathing, fearing that if he tried too hard he'd only do so in a choked sob. Soon he and Beverly were walking together, her hand around his wrist to keep him close. Her grasp around him was decidedly tight despite the short distance they were walking, and it was likely a measure taken in hoping that Will wouldn't try to disappear to the near shadows.

"Look" She said then. They had reached the backstage entrance, the one that Will had been evacuated from a short time earlier. Just on the sidelines of the stage, where dark curtains marked the line between the theatre hall and the backstage rooms often most operational during their performances. Will was skeptical. He feared that Beverly might force him to attempt his aria once more.

Then again, it wasn't all that likely. *What audience was there to perform for?* There was no taking back what he'd done, and Will found there to be a slight comfort in the ruin of it.

Begrudgingly, he drew back the curtain having almost managed to convince himself that little would come from doing so. Those who were to be his audience remained still. Monsieur Chilton stood where Will himself had earlier, voicing explanations and assuring that the audition would resume… *They were waiting for him.*

Will's breath caught.

"You may recall how I told you that our conversation would be of interest to you before." Beverly spoke behind him.

He turned to meet her eyes, and they sparked with recognition as they looked beyond him and towards the auditorium. She returned his gaze then, smiling at once.

"See that, over there?" Beverly drew the black curtain further to glimpse the far distance. She pointed to one of the nearer theatre boxes of the many that spanned the walls. Box number five, the closest to the left of the stage.

"Yes, what of it?" Will questioned.

"Have you ever seen anyone in that box? Because I yet haven't" Beverly said, always the analyst.

Will turned her words over in his mind. "I don't believe I have" he decided despite never having thought to look. "But why is this of interest to me?"

Beverly beamed with anticipation. "You might not take notice of these things yourself," she began, because they both knew he likely hadn't, "Madame du Maurier is often burdened with the duties of others, so she sometimes engages somebody else to manage the tickets in the box office when her time is sparse."

Will simply nodded. Something about the spark in Beverly's eyes held his interest in knowing more. He felt the urge to ask behind her. Ask how this might relate to him, and more so to the Phantom. *What was it he had yet to know?* There were many questions on his mind, but he opted for silence at the realisation that his wants may become suffocating. Besides, she'd likely resolve his doubts in an moment, given the time.

He was lost as to why this particular matter struck him with such impatience. Always deprived for knowledge when discussing the subject of the Phantom... *Why was he so longing for insight on what most regarded as a mere fantasy?*

"Now, the boy that takes her place at times is much easier to beckon than the Madame herself, and from him I have learnt two things…" there was a slight mischief in the way Beverly spoke of her success. Will couldn't help but smile just a bit. He was fond of her lively determination, at times. Only at times. She was a hassle more often than not. A tattletale, and perhaps now even his *friend*.

"Now, the first is no great surprise. Monsieur Chilton plans for the opening date for the Opera to be soon, within the next week." She said. "If all goes well tonight you will lead it."

Will looked down, anguished at the thought of further humiliation. "I believe I've already ruined any chance that I had."

"Not yet" Beverly countered. She coaxed him to look ahead, likely trying to make a point of his lingering audience, but Will's eyes settled on the theatre box instead. He observed it. *What was its importance? What did Beverly mean to say?*

"The other thing of which I've been told," she resumed her discourse at last, looking ahead just as he did. 'Box five of the Opera, the one in which no soul has ever been seen… it is always reserved to a particular name."

"—What does it remind you of, the acronym *O.G?"*

Will turned to look at her, in his eyes a revelation. *It was what the letter that was written to Chilton had been signed with.*

"Opera Ghost" He muttered. It was rather quiet, spoken only to himself. Beverly already knew of what he'd only just realised, but regardless this felt almost *intimate*. He shivered, electric, at the thought of finding the Phantom there and at last knowing his face. Will thought of killing him, perhaps. A worthy penance to his crimes. *Would taking his life, too, be intimate?...*

He met Beverly's eyes then, and she smiled as fast as she'd noted the look on his face. Of course she hadn't a doubt of being mistaken, observant as she was.

"I knew this would be of interest to you after all" She beamed. "You believe he is real just as I do, but I have yet to find out if you know anything more…

"I'm as deprived of knowledge as you are."

"I'm not yet sure of that." She replied. "After all, you seem to have become something of a *muse* to the Phantom. I must know why…"

"It is beyond me" Will said, and it was the truth. Beverly remained pensive for a moment, which was no good sign. She met his eyes then, hardly able to contain herself.

"It is *him* you dreamt about, isn't it?"

It was. Will felt the urge to flush red at her wide and knowing grin. He was silent beyond the halted breath he'd given, looking away when he felt warmer than he would've liked. He

cursed at himself for it. If he hadn't been red with embarrassment before, with all that he'd endured, he certainly was now.

"Keep your head up high, Mr. Mysterious," Beverly said light-heartedly. She turned him once more towards the stage. "He'll be watching you"

Will overlooked the theatre hall, bracing himself. He wasn't given very much time for it. Monsieur Chilton, who continued to reason with some of the onlookers above the stage, quickly met his eyes.

"Go" Beverly said, and Will felt he had no choice but to stumble out and meet them now that he had been discovered. Chilton approached him swiftly, taking him be the arm.

"Ah, there he is!" He announced to those around them, doting the crowd with a wide smile of his own performance. When he turned to look at Will he was nowhere near as humoured.

"Where have you been?!" He all but hissed. "I was told that you'd kept your audience waiting"

Will felt some relief in knowing that Chilton hadn't been there to see it all unfold. Beyond that, he was lost for words and could only return the glare that fell upon him with apprehension, his eyes below the stage lights of a brighter crystalline blue.

"It's no matter" Chilton sighed, "I have just arrived with various men of wealth who may take interest in becoming patrons of this Opera" he explained. "We need the funds, so you truly must perform at your best tonight"

Will paled at the words spoken. *As if this couldn't get any worse.*

"You put too much faith in me" he muttered, timid and crushed with dread.

Chilton glared at Will in warning. "The Opera as we know it depends on your performance tonight" He said with an urgency that seemed sincere. "you will do as I say and you will do it well"

"I can't stand to postpone the show dates any further" he added, tormented. "I've had to rely on the freak value of the Opera ghost mystery to keep us afloat. I'm afraid mere tours and ghost stories can't keep us from ruin much longer…"

Will sucked his teeth. Surely, ruin couldn't have come this quickly to them without previous faults in management. Will was almost certain that there had been struggles at Chilton's hands long before, and it vexed him to be given every ounce of responsibility to salvage it.

He wasn't even remotely sure that he could.

"Why not find somebody else? Why bet everything on *me?"*

"It certainly wasn't a choice of mine" Chilton said, "But I'd rather remain in the Phantom's good graces. I don't wish to experience more harm at his hands..."

The man almost seemed to shiver in his recollection of the attack that he'd suffered. "I don't know about you, but I have an agenda." He announced, neurotic. "My agenda is *living*"

Will could've rolled his eyes at that. He did once Chilton looked away and towards the auditorium. The man smiled outwardly. "That reminds me, I have appointed the entire orchestra to accompany your voice."

Will immediately shot a glance towards the auditorium, and without a fault each and every member of orchestra was there. He sighed. This was becoming more serious with every moment that passed him, and it felt almost surreal.

"All will be perfect, the Phantom should be pleased. Come now" Chilton gestured for Will to come towards the centre of the stage. He took a sharp breath, following idly behind the the other man.

Will stood before everyone, quite awkward to his own notice. In his sudden awareness he wasn't sure what to do with his hands. Wasn't sure what to do with *himself*, in truth.

He fiddled with the hem of his shirt, decidedly, taking in his surroundings. He was encircled by those standing all around him, but thankfully there was nobody in the auditorium excluding the orchestra, who sat in the pit just before the stage. There was nobody occupying the floor seats and nobody in the Opera boxes, to his knowledge. He decided that if he was going to sing he would focus his attentions there and forget of everyone else's existence.

Chilton was at Will's side, voicing what he must have thought to be useful insights on the men that he'd brought to observe the audition — if this could even be called as such. Chilton didn't seem to notice, or bother to notice, how fatally disinterested Will was in the matter. Will simply hummed in agreement once or twice, most intent on observing the expressions of those closest to him and telling himself that this was no dire predicament. This was a small audience after all. If he were to succeed now, he'd soon perform for crowds much larger. He tried to view them in an impersonal light. Tried to forget that they were capable, and there for the sole purpose of, judging his performance.

"This is your rising star, Frederick?" A man's voice spoke at a near distance. Monsieur Gideon, if Will's recollection of Chilton's ramblings served him right. He approached them unhesitatingly, coming to stand near the centre-stage just as they did.

He was even more unhesitating in his stare it seemed. He watched Will intently, both with humour and with an odd sense of cruelty that simmered just below the surface. It was nothing short of discomforting.

Gideon smiled a crooked grin. "This boy will be the one to play a *goddess* symbolic of feminine beauty? you never cease to amuse us, Monsieur!"

He and some others gave loud and hearty laughs. Will's cheeks burned bright red because of it. He tightened his arms around himself, much too aware of his physicality. Now he couldn't help but view it as some form of a predicament.

Was there shame in being who he was?

Chilton cleared his throat. It was clear that embarrassment had seized him too. Of course, Will was an *embarrassment*.

"You might recall that it *was* an ordinary practice throughout history." Chilton said. "Women weren't allowed to partake in theatre until far later, so fellow men would take on their roles"

"Yes, you are quite right Monsieur" Gideon said, but his agreement was more of a mockery. It lacked a humble tone. His eyes still never once escaped Will. Penetrative, but rather than looking through to his very soul they raked over his entire body, obscenely, settling at times. It was uncomfortably thorough, the man truly had no shame.

A lamentable revelation it was, for Will to have discovered that there were undesirable ways of being seen.

Suddenly, Gideon took a step forward and grasped Will by the jaw. He took his chin tightly between his thumb and Index finger, and Will startled at the movement. It hurt. Gideon's fingers were large and unpleasantly warm. He seemed more focused on the force of his hold that its precision. *It hurt*. Will's skin pulled and warped beneath the man's fingertips, and he only realised that he'd been leaning away in opposition to the touch when he almost stumbled back upon being released. He turned his head away, grappling to look anywhere but.

"So *you* are to be our Aphrodite…"

Gideon's voice was nasally and unpleasant. One could tell at that distance, especially. He turned Will's face towards him so that he would be made to look him in the eyes. Now he held him near the base of the jaw, albeit with less force. Will felt the urge to voice his defiance, his expression close to a snarl. The other man didn't seem to mind. He watched him intently, meticulously noting each and every one of his features before finally glancing down to his lips. Will's stomach turned. Never before had he so intensely felt the urge to crawl out of his skin.

"I'll keep an open mind… he certainly has the face for it"

Gideon looked at Chilton in saying so. Will did so too, just to see if he thought anything of the manner in which he had just been handled. To see if he shared the same distaste that Will had been left with, that same stinging sense of indignity. *Of course he didn't.* He grinned with satisfaction because Gideon's words held promise. *Was this normal? Was this to be normal from now on?* Will felt anything but normal. He felt hollow and beyond himself. He felt exploited.

His jaw ached in precise places. Will hated the way the pain lingered where that insolent man's hold had been. He sighed, wincing as he turned away. He felt tired rather than excited for his supposed *'debut'.*

He caught sight of Abigail as he turned. She smiled at him, waving. He smiled back, hoping that she hadn't caught sight of very much. He had a mind to approach her while Chilton was occupied discussing his endeavours with Gideon, but they seemed to take notice of him again almost immediately after taking only a few steps. Will huffed in annoyance, forcing himself to look their way.

"I believe now should be a good time to begin the performance," Chilton said. "...you do know what you are meant to be singing, yes?"

"Yes." Will gritted, shocked at such words.

"Very well then" Chilton seemed pleased at that. "Maestro!" He called. "The Aria of act three, please."

Monsieur Price skimmed through the pages of the musical score in front of him, and the surrounding members of the orchestra upheld their instruments. Will felt a pressing sense of unease. He wasn't yet prepared for this, he would hardly know where to begin.

"Wait!" He intervened. "I wish to do this in my own time"

Chilton gave an apprehensive nod, leaving the centre stage to join the rest. Once alone, Will took slow and measured steps towards the light that shone above him. He looked ahead to where he would hardly take notice of his surrounding audience, and he grounded himself. The polished boards beneath him reflected the soft, golden light of the chandelier, casting a warm glow that danced around him like a halo of sorts.

Will's heart pounded like a distant drum, each beat an echo in his ears counting down to when he would begin his performance. The audience, once buzzing with scattered murmurs, whispers and laughs, fell into a profound silence. The air was thick with anticipation. Will's breath caught in his throat as the weight of the moment settled upon him, but he embraced it this time. Luckily, the intensity of it distracted him from the unpleasantries that he'd endured moments earlier. As severe as this was, it too felt serene.

He closed his eyes for a brief moment, drawing in a deep breath that filled his lungs heavy with air. He noted the familiar scent of the aged velvet curtains, the tang of the polished brass instruments and the faint musk of countless past performances embedded in the wood beneath his feet. He could almost taste the centuries of passion, love and loss, that lingered in the very walls of the place. They were its heart and soul. Will's mind raced between thoughts of those who preceded him, then of his own doubts, wants and dreams.

Think of me...

The opening line of his aria whispered through his mind. He mouthed its words just under his breath, like a fragile promise. It was a phrase that held more weight to him than mere words could fathom. Will felt through it the echoes of past loves that he'd never even had. Unspoken desires left in the dark, undiscovered, hidden and denied. He sighed, his gaze sweeping across the auditorium.

He began to sing.

"Think of me, think of me fondly when we say goodbye..."

At first his voice was little more than a whisper of emotion. Soft as a delicate thread of silk, tender as a lullaby. Even so, it broke the silence that enveloped them in an echo throughout

the theatre hall. It resonated, raw and lonesome. The orchestra hadn't yet begun to play. *He had forgotten to give notice,* Will realised.

He winced. He felt the urge to forfeit, but he had gone much too far to abandon this now. He looked up at the chandelier, grasping desperately at any hopeful part of himself so that he may find the courage to push through until the end.

"...Remember me," he loudened, *"once in a while, please promise me you'll try."*

Will continued, this time clearer, and he found that something shifted within him then. He sang with more confidence, and it wasn't all that bad after all. A weight was lifted off of his chest in realising that this was *it*. The dream that he'd held close to his heart since childhood was his to live now, and he couldn't shy away from it. The words of the aria took root in his soul, blossoming into something more, something vibrant and full of life.

"If you find that once again you long to take your heart back and be free,"

As the melody poured forth his voice gathered strength. each phrase bloomed into the next with a fluid, effortless grace.

"If you ever find a moment, spare a thought for me."

Will looked to the orchestra, and all of them remained motionless, watching in awe and reverence. He recognised Bryan Zeller in the crowd, and the man's face was a portrait of pride. He stirred to grab hold of his instrument, accompanying Will's voice alone with the thrum of a cello that was of a similar gentle caress.

Others within the orchestra joined him, slowly, and their entrance was so gradual and soft that it felt like the music had been there with him all along. The hum of strings and musical notes rose up like tendrils of smoke, entwining with Will's voice. He could feel the music beneath his feet, a subtle vibration that pulsed as though it was the beating heart of the stage.

As he sang, Will realised that his performance was different from the manner in which he had known this song before. He had always heard it from Freddie's mouth, loud and frivolous and lacking the emotion of its words. And the orchestra, mechanical, sharp and even louder than her so as to drown out her quavering. This was not the brisk pace he had heard, hammered into his mind with every rehearsal. No, this was something else. Something more alive, attuned to the vulnerability of the piece and its motives. *Attuned to him*, and the pace that he'd set which felt almost *romantic*. He felt each word as it left his lips, every note a thread woven into a tapestry of emotions that were entirely his and belonged to no other.

He felt as though he were soaring, his voice lifting him higher and higher, carrying him far above the stage, above the audience, above the world itself. His voice scaled heights that left him in awe of his own abilities. He could only scarcely believe that the sound was his alone. It was as though he were channeling something other, something divine, and it was overwhelming in its beauty.

"We never said our love was evergreen or as unchanging as the sea..."

Will’s voice softened, tinged with a wistful melancholy. The song had almost reached its pinnacle, and as the final notes hung in the air Will glanced towards the Opera box he'd been told of. *Box five.* He searched the shadows, and he imagined that the Phantom watched him there, unseen but ever-present. Will's heart faltered at the thought.

"If you ever find a moment... stop and think of me."

His last words were sincere, not merely sung but given. Offered to the shadows where the Phantom might dwell.

As the words faded the orchestra soon followed suit, the hum of the instruments withering into nothingness. It left a silence so profound that for a moment, Will wondered if time itself had stopped. Suddenly, the silence was shattered by a wave of applause. It was a thunderous roar that seemed to shake the very foundations of the Opera. The warmth of it washed over Will, mingling with the fast-paced flutter of his heartbeat, the rush of blood like rivers through his veins. He stood there, bathed in the adoration of the crowd, and he wondered if he was dreaming. *How could any of this be true?*

Somehow, the unseen eyes of the Opera ghost were what Will felt most keenly. Will imagined, in thought and in fantasy, that they now regarded him with an adoration greater than that of any number of people in a crowd. Just the thought of it held Will in a chokehold, of a grasp tighter than any manner of foreign praise and applause...

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!